



AN
INCONVENIENT
WAR
GRACE
COLLINS

An Inconvenient War

A Regency Historical Romance

By
Grace Colline

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Also by Grace Colline:

An Inconvenient Engagement

An Inconvenient Heart

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Chapter One

Miss Penelope Pratt sighed as she sat down beside the window. The town was quiet, at least as far as she could see, which wasn't very far. The Pratts' manor was on the end of the main road that led through Lytchley, and consequently very little traffic passed before it.

Pen sighed again and fingered the lapel of her newest spencer. It was a pale sage green, complementing the green pin striping in her white cotton gown. It, too, was newly arrived from the mantua maker, and she wanted nothing more than to get approval from one of her friends.

Therein lay the problem. Both of her friends were newly married. One with child, the other on her honeymoon. Pen fingered the envelope of the most recent letter and a smile played about her lips. Henrietta did sound happy, and Eliza was just over the road at Tredwell Abbey. Perhaps she could call...

As she made to push away from the window, a horse and rider came into view. She pressed forward to see more clearly, then ran to the door. She flung it open just as the visitor had dismounted and was walking up the path.

"The Honorable Reginald Darrow." Penelope curtsied a little deeper than was wont, grinning as she rose.

"Miss Penelope Pratt." Reggie bowed dramatically. They both giggled then, and Reggie offered his arm. "I was hoping you would take a turn with me. We will stay within sight of your home and chaperone, so it should not be amiss."

She smiled and took his arm lightly. "No, indeed."

They walked along the path that led around the house, leaving the horse grazing in the front yard. The mossy flagstones wound through a shrubbery and toward the back garden.

Reggie was silent for a moment, then said, "I will be leaving for Nottinghamshire, soon."

A chill clutched at Penelope's heart. "What? Why?"

Reggie sighed and kicked a pebble. "Father thinks I need to grow up a bit. Thinks I'm immature and reckless. Just because I bumped into the hedge with Henrietta's pony trap one night after having a little too much port. Really, anyone could have done it."

Pen bit her lip and said nothing.

“Anyway, he is packing me off into the army. Mama is having my regimentals ordered as we speak.”

“I don’t know what to say. You will get to travel, at least. I’ve never been anywhere but Lytchley and London.”

“But dash it all—I don’t want to be stuck in some backwater village running about playing soldier. I’m quite happy as it is. Here. In our village...”

“Have you told your father this?”

“Of course, but does he listen? Even Mama agrees with him. It is hopeless.”

Pen patted his arm and said, “Well, perhaps I can write to you.”

“I say, would you?”

“Of course, though Mrs. Ainsworth would have to read them to make it respectable. But I should think a girl could write to a soldier if he is a friend.”

“Well, who’s to say anything against it. I will leave you my direction as soon as I have it. Perhaps I will even write back now and then!”

The rather fine box hedges led them to the end of the garden path and Reggie steered her back around to the front where his horse still grazed. He smiled at her, his expression youthful, yet a manliness hovered in the background—he had grown so much in the past year. There was a broadness to his chest and shoulders now, and the shock of sandy hair cascading over his right forehead gave a handsome cast to his features. Her face softened as she looked back—dear Reggie.

He vaulted into the saddle and she watched him rein his horse out the front gate and onto the road. He raised an arm and then spurred his horse on, galloping off down the road and up the hill to the left of the Pratt house.

Penelope stared after him until he was out of sight. She wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the faint chill of the late morning, then went inside to procure a shawl.

Snatching up a reticule, she arranged it around her shoulders and called out to Mrs. Ainsworth. “I am going to call on Lady Strathom. I shall return for tea.”

Out the door and past the front gate she walked, her spirits unaccountably low. She adjusted the shawl around her shoulders and stepped up to the road with a lively foot. Rarely did anything go down toward Winder, but this morning a large flock of sheep scuttled in time with the dog’s barking and nipping. She waited until they had passed before stepping down and crossing to the other side.

Trees shaded the road on the far side, and she drew her shawl more tightly about her shoulders. After nearly half a mile, she turned at the tiny gatehouse and climbed the drive to Tredwell Abbey.

She passed the stables out on the moor to her right. The cottage where the steward lived stood silhouetted against the sunshine, filled with the simple gothic elegance of her friend’s home which rose from the moor as she crested the hill. The stairs had been swept clean and she shook the dirt of the road

from her shoes before climbing them.

The door was answered by the butler and she gave her name, then waited in the parlor for only a few minutes before Eliza appeared. She rushed in with her characteristically quick step and hugged Penelope warmly, before drawing her down onto the settee beside her.

“Oh, you are a sight! When did you get that shawl? It is absolutely perfect!”

“On my last trip to London. Father sent me and Mrs. Ainsworth shopping along a street in Chelsea that Henrietta told me about.”

“Yes, I remember. King’s Road, I think.”

“The very one. So how are you feeling?”

Eliza’s eyebrows climbed and she sat back with a hand on her stomach. “Oh, La! Much better now. I was very ill this time around. William kept calling Dr. Welles and would not listen to a thing I said.”

“What did Dr. Welles say?”

“That everything was going accordingly and that only time would tell.”

Penelope was sober as she remembered the baby Eliza had lost so many months before.

“Well, and enough of that. What have you been up to?” Eliza said.

“Nothing. I love Lytchley, but there really is nothing going on.”

Eliza chuckled. “Not if you talk to Addy Welles!”

“Oh! Well, I know something even Addy doesn’t know. Reggie is going into the army!”

“The Honorable? That is news! How did you hear of it? Henrietta is still on her honeymoon, isn’t she?”

“Reggie stopped by this morning and we took a turn around the garden. He seemed rather down about it all.”

“I can imagine it doesn’t quite suit his current tastes.”

“No. And I remembered Father talking about the war in the colonies and over in Spain and it made me so frightened for him.”

“Surely, they are the United States now, no longer the colonies...”

“Oh, you will never convince Father of that!”

Eliza adjusted her skirt slightly. “And so, what plans have you for the summer?”

“Oh, to read and play piano, and come to tea whenever you invite me. And, of course, visit Henrietta when she gets back...except she won’t be coming back to Lytchley,” Penelope concluded sorrowfully.

“No, but at least you will go up to London eventually, where I am sure you will meet often.”

The housekeeper, Haddley, brought in tea and Eliza poured it. She placed some cake on a tiny plate and handed it to Penelope, who accepted it with a smile.

She took a bite, then said, “Oh, your cook is wonderful with cakes. Our cook in London produces the driest things you could ever imagine.”

“I didn’t think they were quite so bad when I was there.”

Penelope took another bite and sighed. “Well, you won’t convince me otherwise. Heavenly!”

Eliza left her piece mostly untouched and instead added another spoonful of sugar to her tea. She stirred it thoughtfully and finally said, “Why have you never done the Season?”

“Mmm. Father feels it is a horrible tradition. And by ‘horrible’ he means expensive.”

Eliza laughed. “Well, you won’t get Henrietta to recommend it.”

“No, indeed! She had a foul time of it. Once Father heard about what happened, he completely decided against the Season for me.”

“How did that make you feel?”

Penelope swallowed the last of her cake and set the plate down. “You know, I did not want to do it to begin with, but there is something about being actively involved in looking for a husband. As it is, I am just waiting for one to fall in my lap...and there aren’t many. In fact, there aren’t any.”

“Yes, I can understand that.”

Penelope’s eyebrow twitched up. “And yet, that is exactly what happened to you!”

Eliza blushed happily. “Yes, indeed. And I am the happiest of women. But I feel certain the same will happen for you.”

Penelope sighed a little wistfully. “Well, my dear, I do hope so! Not that that is all there is to life, but for us it seems to be the gateway to adventure!”

“Indeed. Life is an adventure...for those who have the heart for it.”

The two took a turn about the grounds before Penelope said, “I must take my leave. Thank you, dear Eliza, for a lovely visit.” They hugged as Penelope left to return home.

Her feet moved slowly down the hill as she made her way toward the main road, and then along the center of the road until she got to the Pratt residence. Once there, she called out to Mrs. Ainsworth and began to untie her bonnet. Setting it down on the side table, she began to unbutton her spencer just as her maid came from the back of the house, somewhat breathless. She took the spencer and bonnet and disappeared up the stairs with them. Penelope wandered listlessly through the house, searching for something to do.

As she came near the pianoforte, her expression softened, and she sat down and let her fingers roam over the keys. They fell into an old Scottish tune and she played happily from memory for some time, before pulling her music toward her and choosing a newer piece to work on. The sun was low in the sky before she stopped and stretched her arms and hands, sliding to the end of the bench and standing with a sigh.

She padded lightly through the house to the kitchen to search for a snack. Cook busied herself about the stove, bending down to pull out a tray of buns as Penelope entered through the low archway.

She sniffed appreciatively and said, “Mmmm. Smells lovely, Mrs. Devry.”

“Take one—butter is on the table there.”

Penelope picked up a napkin and quickly placed a bun in the middle, licking her burned fingertips immediately afterward. She added a generous dollop of butter to a hole in the top and then wandered outside. Blowing gently on the bun, she walked through the little wilderness behind the house and carriage house.

A low, stone seat curved around the base of a spreading oak tree and she sat down, nibbling on her hot bun. She heard a clattering of hooves from the road, and a carriage came up the side road toward the carriage house. She took another bite of her bun and stared with raised eyebrows as her father’s carriage pulled through, and the footman jumped down to lower the step for Aloysius E. Pratt.

She stood and dabbed her mouth with the napkin before wiping off her buttery fingers.

She made her way to where her father stood with his valise and called, “Papa! What are you doing here?”

A fit of coughing met with her query and her father stepped free. “Penelope! Got a dreadful cough that won’t go away, and the doctors sent me to the country to try and get over it.”

Something cold clutched at Penelope’s heart—that was how her mother had died. First a cough, then country, then bedridden for weeks before passing.

He saw the expression on her face and pulled her into a swift embrace. “Now, my dear. It’s nothing like that. I promise.”

“But how can you be sure? Mother...”

“Your mother had a cancer. It was in her lungs. This is just a nagging roughness in my throat that won’t go away. We’ll give it a few days and see if it gets better.”

She nodded, hugging him again. “But I am so happy to see you!”

He leaned back to look askance at her. “I should have thought you would be busy with your friends.”

She sighed. “They are both married now, and busy with their lives.”

“Well, once I am better, we will go to London and take in Vauxhall Gardens, the museum, and maybe even go punting on the Thames!”

“Ha! You won’t leave off work long enough, I would wager.”

They had reached the back door by then and Aloysius pushed the door open, Penelope following.

“Hello, Mrs. Devry.” Aloysius removed his hat and nodded to the cook as he strode through the kitchen.

He strode down the hall to his small study on the first floor and went in, setting his valise down on the desk. Penelope paused in the doorway as her father broke into a coughing fit. She rushed to his side, but he held up a hand

to restrain her.

"I'm okay, it will pass," he choked out.

She stood helplessly by as his coughing first worsened, then slowed and finally stopped. Something nudged at her elbow and she glanced over to see Mrs. Devry standing there with a steaming cup of tea. Penelope took it and placed it on the desk in front of her father and, after the coughing eased, he took a quick sip.

"Thank you. Believe it or not, it is already much better than it was." He smiled shortly at her and she forced the corners of her mouth upward.

They had a quiet supper that evening. Aloysius read some papers as he ate, while Penelope gazed out the window, wishing someone would come visit her.

After supper, they sat companionably in the parlor with a mild fire burning in the fireplace. The evening post arrived, and she rose to take the letters from the maid. Sifting through them, she squealed in delight to see a letter from Henrietta.

My Dearest Pen,

I hardly know what to tell you! So far, life has been wonderful and full of excitement. We took a short trip to France for our honeymoon. Lord, I did not like the sea voyage. But I brought you something back and I can't wait to show you. However, that gets me to the main purpose of this letter.

I want you to come stay with me for a visit! Please say you will—I can keep you busy with shopping, and gardens, and even the museum if you will just say yes. I love my husband, but he is gone for hours during the day attending to business and lawyers and such, and there is no one here for me.

I must keep this short as we are set to go to his mother's for supper. I am getting used to her, and she to me, but it has been something of a struggle. I would dearly love to have you here to talk to me, so I don't get morbid. I will happily send our carriage to you if you agree to come.

Do say you will!

All my love,

Henrietta Strathom

(Lord, how I love writing that!)

Penelope read the letter over once more before looking to her father. "Oh, Papa! Henrietta writes for me to come to London."

Aloysius glanced up from his own letters and frowned. "Eh...what's that, then?"

"London. Henrietta wishes for me to join her."

"Just married, isn't she?"

"Yes, but she says her husband is at business much of the day and she is lonely. May I go?"

His eyebrows rose as he considered. "I can't see why not. Give me a few days here and I can take you up myself. I just need to—" His voice broke as he burst out into coughing once more. He cleared his throat and continued, "I

just need to get over this infernal cough.”

She nodded and said, “She does say she could send her own carriage, but I would hate for her to do that if you will be going up anyway in a few days. I will write her and let her know.”

She rose and went to her writing desk, pulling a piece of paper toward her and preparing a pen. Unstoppering the ink, she dipped the pen in and wrote an enthusiastic answer before folding it and sealing it with red wax and her father’s seal. She set it in the salver next to the front door for the maid to post the next morning and returned to her place by the fire.

She was pleased to see that her father’s coughing fits truly seemed to be coming fewer and farther in between, and soon went to bed happy in the anticipation of going to London in the coming days.

Chapter Two

The Honorable Reginald Darrow, future Viscount of Loughton, spurred his horse into a gallop past the old abbey ruins. The wind bit into his face as the ground raced beneath them. His horse's pace began to falter, and he pulled Charger up to a walk, reaching down to pat him soundly on the shoulder.

Blowing out a breath, he leaned backward to gaze up at the sky—gray and cloudy, typical English day. Even for early summer, it was cool on the moor. He was grateful for the riding jacket, and only wished he had worn gloves.

Bleakly, he peered around. The moor undulated gently around him. Heather and gorse covered the land. It was still too early for the heather to bloom; however, bursts of yellow gorse punctuated the view. He would miss this.

He considered. Essentially, his father was sending him into the army and possibly into battle. The commission was purchased, his regimentals nearly ready. Within days, he would be on his way—away from home and all he held dear.

There was a lot that he held dear. Not the least of which was the willowy woman in the small manor home in Lytchley. He looked down, and his face was grim. He knew she still thought of him as a boy, and yet he had grown into something much more, and he wanted her to see that. Perhaps by going into the army, she would be forced to face the fact that he was a man. Maybe Penelope would come to feel something for him...

By God, he would do his best to make it so!

He reined Charger around and headed back toward his father's estate. But then, it would one day be his, and he felt a strong connection to the land and all who lived on it. He had since he was a boy. All he had lacked was a direction, a purpose.

Well, he thought, now I have one.

The stables appeared as he crested a small rise. His horse broke into a trot at the sight of home and Reggie pulled him back. He was in no hurry to get home.

As they neared the well-maintained block of buildings, Cyril, the youngest groom, came forward to take control of Charger. Reggie swung

down, patted his horse, and fished a carrot out of his jacket pocket to feed to him. Then, with a nod to Cyril, he turned and headed toward the house.

He entered through the servants' door, making his way along the labyrinth of passages and rooms to the kitchen where he nicked a biscuit, winking at the cook as he did so. A maid pushed past him, and then he was in the main hall of the house and able to climb the stairs to his own room.

"Reginald!"

He paused as his mother's voice rang out.

"I need you to try on the uniform that just arrived."

He turned. "Yes, Mama?"

"Your valet has it—go try it on so I can see how it fits!"

He sighed. He was sweaty from his ride and did not feel like struggling into a uniform, but to resist would be to spur his mother into a tirade and he chose instead to acquiesce. "One moment, Mama."

Milton, his valet, had the coat and breeches ready. He also had warm water for washing up in the basin and Reggie thanked him as he quickly washed off the sweat and dust from his ride. Then he donned the shirt, white breeches, red coat and shining boots. All fit perfectly and he stood in front of the mirror, looking at himself.

A man stared back.

Something shifted inside him. He held no romantic notions of war—the sight of the soldier in front of him brought images of violence and death to his mind. His jaw set, and he was suddenly very different from the younger man everyone knew.

A knock sounded at the door and his mother entered. Her hands flew to her mouth as she gasped, and then wiped a tear from her eye. "Oh, my little boy—all grown into a soldier!"

"Mama, please." He nodded to his valet, who began to help him unbutton the coat. "Now you know it fits; let me have a few moments to myself, if you would." He said it with a touch more authority than he had done in the past and her eyes fluttered a little at the change.

She said simply, "Of course. I'll be in the parlor when you are done."

Reggie slipped out of the jacket as the door shut behind her. He sighed, then nodded to Milton as he handed the breeches over. Soon, he was dressed in more casual clothing and stepping down the sweeping staircase leading to the main rooms below. He straightened his cravat before entering the parlor where his mother waited. He was surprised to see his father sitting there as well.

"Father, Mama? Is something wrong?"

"Sit down, son."

Reggie sat on the edge of the settee, hands on his knees.

His parents exchanged a glance, and his father spoke, "Your sister is now married, and that leaves just you home and under our care."

"I'll be in the army soon enough. Just a few days, in fact."

“Reggie, England is now at war with France and soon may be at war with the colonies.”

“And...?”

“We are worried for your safety.”

“You weren’t worried a few months ago.”

“We weren’t at war, then.”

“Father, I can handle this. I am nearly twenty-one.”

“Yes, but you are my only heir. I don’t want to risk losing you.”

“What was all this supposed to be? Just a way to get poor Reggie to grow up? I’m grown, Father, and if I have not shown that, then it is partly because I haven’t been given the chance. I have asked for a job, a chance to prove myself, and there has been nothing. Now I have the chance. I may not have wanted it at first, but I want it now.” And he realized that he truly did. “I don’t know that I believe in this war, but I believe in England, and I will do my duty for her.”

Lord Loughton’s eyes grew wide, and his mother’s eyes grew misty. He hung his head after a moment and nodded. “Then you will go with our prayers. Just be careful, son.”

Reggie stood and nodded to them before striding from the room. He cast about and found himself in the same position as always—with nothing to do. He went to the front door and looked around, standing on the porticoed steps staring down the drive that led to the door.

Stepping down, he walked down the drive to the Stanton road, only to be stopped by a flood of sheep being herded by a pair of dogs.

Jamie Wetherby, almost exactly his same age, strolled behind the sheep and waved to him.

Leaning on the gate post, Reggie grinned and said, “Where are you off to?”

Jamie gestured with his elbow down the road. “To one of the fallow fields. What are you doing, m’lord?”

Reggie shrugged and stood, then realized he was almost a head taller than the other man. “Jamie, you shrank!”

“I think you grew. I hear you are off into the military.”

Reggie nodded. “Thursday next.”

“Aren’t you worried?”

Reggie sighed. “I think I am more worried about dying of boredom here.”

“Why not buy your own home? Live on your own?”

“Is that what you would do?”

Jamie laughed. “Not in my power to do anything of the sort. Ma needs me, especially since Alice...” He trailed off and looked away.

Reggie was respectfully silent, thinking of Jamie’s older sister.

Jamie straightened and whistled, then said, “Excuse me—the dogs are impatient.” He strode off after the milling sheep, and Reggie watched them

go.

The sky darkened as he turned to head back to the house. His steps heavy and slow, he paused and stared off toward the east, in the direction of the village and the Pratt manor home. He looked up at the sky—only to see the rising twilight—and changed his mind. Penelope would be busy with something, and his own mother would be upset if he went riding again.

Well then, he thought, so be it.

His steps changed course toward the stable. Charger was still warm from his earlier ride, so he asked for his hunter. He fed another carrot to Charger while he waited for the mare to be saddled. When she was ready, he swung aboard and reined her toward the road.

As he turned onto the main road, the coach from Stanton went by, its headlamps lit. He let the hunter break into a slow trot and watched the shadows spread over the moors and fields. The village itself was nearly blanketed in darkness and he slowed the mare to a walk as they neared it.

No one was about. The shops were locked up and the windows were shuttered. Light spilled through slats and some windows here and there, illuminating the people within. He rode past, glancing at the different tableaux. Addy Welles set a small roast on the table before her husband, the local doctor. In another, the new vicar, Reverend Waddell, was sitting beside his fire, sipping from a cup. In the distance, on a rise, he could just see the lights of Tredwell Abbey.

But it was the small manor house on the edge of the village that he was interested in. Gradually, he came to it and kept the mare still on the road as he looked in through the front windows.

Penelope sat at her piano, playing something softly while her father read beside the lamp.

Reggie watched for a while. A flush went through him, filling him with an almost unknown desire. He urged the hunter to take a step toward the house until the maid came in and closed the curtains, cutting off his view. Slowly, he turned the horse around and rode back toward home. He reined in the horse as they crested the small rise and looked back toward the little manor house all lit from within. His heart hammered and he swallowed against it before turning away and riding resolutely on.

Chapter Three

The sun peeked through the east window of Penelope's corner room. She sighed as she opened her eyes and looked around. Pushing herself up, she drew her dressing gown around her and slipped into some house shoes to go down to breakfast. Her hair was still contained underneath the embroidered cap and she stretched her tall, willowy frame as she walked down the steps to the dining room.

Her father was already there, dressed in a brown jacket and eating his eggs and kidneys with marmalade toast. She picked up a boiled egg with the tongs and selected some bacon, as well as toast with strawberry jam, before taking her regular seat at the table. She poured a cup of tea, dropping a teaspoon of sugar into it, and stirred it idly as she stared out the window.

Her father coughed, once, then twice, and was silent. She glanced over at him, smiling.

His eyes flicked to her and he frowned. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You aren't coughing nearly so much as you were."

He considered a moment, and then nodded. "You know, I think you are right. My throat is already feeling better."

"That is excellent."

"Indeed, yes—the sooner I can get back to my business dealings, the better. Get you to London and all the diversions there!"

She smiled and took a bite of bacon, then tapped around the edge of the egg cup to remove the top of the shell. With her spoon, she scooped up the glutinous contents and ate them neatly. When the shell was empty, she turned her attention to the toast.

The bell rang and, in moments, a note was brought to Penelope. She opened it quickly and said, "Oh, it's from Eliza... I mean, Lady Strathom. She wishes to ride with me today."

"Does she have a horse for you? Yours is still in London."

"I believe so." She looked at the maid who stood, waiting. "Tell the boy that I will join her ladyship presently."

She rose, leaving her napkin next to the plate and heading back up the stairs to her bedroom. Once there, she quickly dressed in her riding habit,

letting her maid set her hair before heading back downstairs and out the front door into the cool, early summer morning.

The ground was slightly damp as she walked, and dirt clung to her riding boots. The road was busier than usual, and she noted three horses and two carriages go by as she made her way toward Tredwell Abbey. Her step was light as she considered that her father had not coughed once since breakfast.

Eliza was standing by the stable, watching the horses being groomed and saddled.

She turned and smiled at Penelope, saying, “Ah! You are right on time!”

Penelope nodded toward the undone button of Eliza’s rose-brown riding habit jacket.

Eliza rubbed a hand over the mound on her stomach. “It is getting too tight for some things!”

“Are you sure you should ride in your condition?”

“Dr. Welles seems to think it will be good for me. Fresh air and healthy exercise, he called it.”

Penelope smiled. “Then let us get to it! I am so glad you have a horse for me.”

“Indeed. We tried to return Old Shan after William found Lovey for me, but the Loughtons have not been in a hurry to get her back.”

They were helped into the saddles, and stirrups were adjusted, then they trotted sedately toward a large field newly plowed.

Eliza continued, “I thought we could ride along the road that leads to the tenant’s cottages and check on Elspeth Thornton. We shan’t dismount, but we can see if there is anything she needs.”

“That sounds like a good plan.”

They rode sedately, neither much of a horsewoman. Both horses were older and settled in their gaits. The fields gave way to open moors as they rode, and the breeze turned crisp, stinging their cheeks pink. Eliza was quiet as they went, and Penelope was happy to stay silent as well.

Finally, however, she said, “Are you feeling well this time?”

“I am, now that I am past the first part. I feel quite hearty, though William and the staff tend to watch me as though I might break at any moment.”

“That would be tiresome, I think.”

“It is. I have to remind myself that it is natural after losing the first. And it wounded me deeply—don’t think I have gotten over that completely. But I am hopeful that all will be well this time around.”

“I think that is everyone’s frame of mind. There is just the fear that it may go the way the other did.”

“I know.” Eliza turned to Penelope and smiled knowingly. “But it tests my patience sometimes. Even now, William almost forbade me to ride out with you.”

“But he didn’t...”

“No. That is true.”

A lonely cottage with a low outbuilding appeared over the rise of the road and Eliza called out, “Mrs. Thornton?”

The door opened and Elspeth Thornton’s frail form appeared, wrapped in an enormous shawl. “Eh? Oh! Good morning, Lady Strathorn!”

“Mrs. Thornton, this is my friend Miss Pratt.”

“How do you do, Miss Pratt?”

“Well, thank you. And you?”

“Can’t complain. Lungs is clear now, that’s a mercy.”

“How are you for coal?”

“Luckett brought some over just yesterday. And I got that venison roast you sent.”

“Excellent. Is there anything you need?”

“Nay, lady. I am well.”

“All right then, we will leave you in peace. Have a good day, Mrs. Thornton.”

They turned their horses about and headed back down the road toward the abbey. Penelope’s horse broke into a slow trot and Lovey, Eliza’s horse, began to jog as well. They jogged for a quarter mile before the horses tired of their antics and slowed back down to a walk. Eliza laughed out loud, and Penelope joined her. The moors echoed their laughter back to them.

Penelope joined Eliza for tea, and the two of them sat in the parlor, warming their hands and sipping sweet, hot tea with buttered scones.

“Mmmm,” Penelope said. “These are wonderful!”

“My cook made them.”

“You taught her, didn’t you?”

Eliza smiled. “Perhaps...but she outdoes me.”

“How are you liking being a ‘lady’ now?”

Eliza frowned and looked off through the windows. “It has taken some getting used to. I was so accustomed to doing everything on my own and giving up those duties has been hard. But”—she turned back to Penelope with a half-smile—“I won’t deny that it is quite restful at times to leave the cooking and the sewing to someone else! Especially now...”

“I can well imagine. Have you heard from Henrietta?”

Eliza smiled and set her cup down. “Indeed! She sounds terribly happy, but a little lonely, too.”

“Yes, she wrote begging me to join her. Father came up from London just yesterday to recover from an awful cough, and already seems better. He wishes to rest for a week and then head back if he is still doing well.”

“The soot in London is so terrible! But I so enjoyed my time there.”

Penelope smiled in remembrance. “If you come during summer, I can take you to Vauxhall Gardens for wonderful entertainments!”

Eliza sighed. “I don’t think I will be going anywhere for quite some time now. William is so cautious of me.”

“Did I hear my name?” William peered round the doorway and came slowly into the parlor. He bent over his wife and kissed her while Penelope looked away.

“Penelope was talking about going to London.”

“Ah. And are you wanting to go?”

She smiled up at him, then watched him as he sat on the settee next to her. “I don’t know—I hadn’t thought about it. But now that I do, I suppose it might be fun. Penelope tells such tales of the gardens, and I could never get enough of the museum!”

William’s face turned gentle, and he said, “Well, what if we go? George has invited us down to stay in Lincoln House, and I can vouch for its comfort.”

Eliza chuckled. “I would never question George’s hospitality. And now that I am feeling so much better, the trip shouldn’t be too bad.”

He nodded. “Well, then. Let me write to George and speak to Rivers, and we can let Leavitt and Minnie know they need to pack.”

Penelope reached out excitedly to grasp Eliza’s hands and the pair giggled with glee. “Oh, I am so glad—all three of us together in London!”

“Poor London!”

“Nonsense! It will be such fun. We will kidnap Henrietta and force her to go to the museum.”

“She will force us to go shopping.”

“Well, that isn’t so bad. There’s that new dress shop she quite raves about.”

“When are you heading down there?” Eliza asked.

Penelope sighed. “As soon as Father wills it. I don’t expect he will want to stay here long. He never does.”

“Well, we will just have to make sure we all end up there together. Come, let’s write to Henrietta now and tell her.”

Eliza drew Penelope after her to a writing desk, and together they worded the missive to their friend. Eliza wrote the direction and then it was sealed, and together they gave it to the butler to be taken to the post.

“There, that’s done. And now I must be headed home,” Penelope said.

Eliza hugged her and walked her to the door. Penelope trotted down the steps, then turned to wave before heading off down the curving drive.

Penelope strolled leisurely along, taking in the vibrant, early summer greens and the flowers that edged the drive. She came to the small lodge by the gate and stepped into the road. She saw movement on her right and looked up in time to see Reggie urge his horse over the fence and down into the road before her.

“Ho there! Rather late for you, isn’t it?” he said.

“Not so! I am returning from a visit with Eliza. What are you doing here?”

He swung down and walked beside her. “Just a bit bored, you know?”

She sighed. "A little, I suppose. But there always seems to be something that needs to be done. I think sometimes, I just don't want to do it."

"I would love to have something to do."

She frowned, her fine eyebrows coming together over her gray eyes. "But surely, you are almost a man. No one could stop you from doing something."

"What do you mean by 'almost' a man? I think I am one right now. You should have seen me in my uniform."

She chuckled, and a shadow passed over his face. "Oh, Reggie. It takes more than a uniform to make a man."

Silence fell between them, and she belatedly realized she had offended him. She quickly tried to say something, but he cut her off with a decisive slash of his hand.

Without a word, he vaulted astride Charger and then steered him back along the road leading to Lytchley, before spurring him into a canter.

She watched him go and felt something crumple inside. A loss she had not expected to feel, and she was forced to reassess her feelings for her friend's brother. She stood stock still, watching until he had disappeared around the bend in the road. Biting her lower lip, she continued on her way to her house.

Well, she mused. This is a strange turn of events. How to deal with this... But still, she thought, she had not said anything untrue. Reggie needed to grow up—that could not be denied. And perhaps, she thought, the army would help him do just that.

But the war...

She stopped at the thought of some harm coming to him. Perhaps worse—if he were killed in some far-off battle. What then?

Oh, how can the Loughtons risk him like this?

She continued on her way, hands clenched together before her. She barely noticed passing through her gate, nor walking up the path to the front door. It opened before she reached it and the maid stepped aside as she passed, heading up the stairs and into her bedroom, where she collapsed on her bed.

She loved Reggie.

Oh, Lord, what to do? She couldn't leave it such...but how to contact him? It would be highly improper to write to him, and she certainly couldn't call on him at his home. What to do?

She sat up and drummed her heels against the bottom side of the bed. Rising, she went downstairs to her writing desk and quickly penned a note to Henrietta:

Dearest Hen,

You will be pleased to know that we are all well, and Father's cough is better. He talks of returning to London very soon, so I will be there for much of the summer I believe. I know Eliza has written you to say much the same thing, so we will all three be together once more.

I understand Reggie is about to join the army. I just saw him, and I may have said something that he took objection to. I hate for him to go off thinking I slighted him. If you should write to him, could you hint that I am not completely satisfied with how we left things?

Penelope scratched out the last paragraph and then crumpled the paper and sent it soaring into the fireplace. It was no good—she would just have to wait and see if she got another chance to speak to him.

Aloysius strode past the door to the parlor, and she called out to him. “Papa?”

He paused and reversed so he could lean into the room.

“Are you better? When do you think we will go to London?”

He cleared his throat and said, “I am thinking within a week. Shortly after your friend, the Darrow boy, goes off to Margale.”

Somehow the news went through her heart and she simply nodded, all joy suddenly lost for the trip. *Off to Margale...and life in the army.* She hated that things were left the way they were.

As usual, when she felt low, she drifted toward the pianoforte and sat down. Her fingers ran over a few arpeggios and scales before she began an old song of loss and sorrow. Sighing, her fingers came to a stop and she began again with an upbeat Scottish tune, but even that could not lift her spirits.

She rose and went down the short hall, noting the candlelight in her father’s study. A sudden need to be out of the house came over her and she retrieved a shawl, snuck past Mrs. Ainsworth dozing in the parlor, and went outside into the cool evening air.

The moon shone bright overhead and she walked to the stone bench in the back garden. Its cold surface chilled her through the thin material of her gown, and she shivered a little. Adjusting her shawl, she tried to wrap her hands within its folds to keep them warm.

Suddenly, the night was split by the sound of hoofbeats out on the road. She rose to go and see what it was.

The moonlight lit upon a man on horseback standing just outside the front gate. She walked slowly toward him and quickly made out Reggie’s features in the silver glow. Shaded and lit from above, he appeared tall and broad, and fearsome. Her breath caught at the transformation.

She paused by the stile and peered up at him. “Reggie, I am so sorry if I offended you earlier.”

He looked away for a moment, then cocked his head back toward her. “It’s just that everyone treats me like I am still fourteen years old. I’ll be twenty-one in a couple of months.”

“You’re right. It’s just, it’s come upon us all so gradually, that it isn’t until moments like this that one sees the transformation.”

He nodded, looking at her. “I most especially do not want you thinking of me as a child.”

“I don’t. Not anymore,” she said softly.

The door opened behind her and Mrs. Ainsworth called out, “Miss Pratt, do come in. It is rather chilly.”

Penelope sighed, glancing back at Reggie. “Good night, Mr. Darrow.”

“Good night, Miss Pratt.”

Chapter Four

The days flew past until one morning, Reggie stood in front of the mirror once more, dressed in his uniform and about to step down into the family carriage for the trip to Margale in Nottinghamshire. Shadows lay beneath his bright blue eyes and the skin around his mouth was taut with tension. He turned from the mirror and grabbed his gloves, then headed down the stairs to the front porch of the house.

The family carriage waited, and he paused to see his trunk and his bag loaded and secured before stepping into the coach. His mother waved a handkerchief and his father stood with his chest out and his mustache trembling. Reggie lifted a hand and tried to smile as the carriage jolted forward and his journey began.

He leaned back, staring blankly at the interior of the carriage. He noted the lining of the roof was frayed in one corner and wondered that his mother had allowed it to remain so. Gazing out the window, he watched the trees go by, then give way to a dry-stone-walled field dotted with sheep. Lytchley, he thought. He would miss it.

War seemed so far away from it all.

But war loomed over him, its weight pressing down inexorably upon him. The country hummed with anticipation, and its presence filled newspapers and parlors across the nation. The Americans this, the French that, and lying in between, the center of the British Empire—England.

Margale arrived at the end of a very long day and he reported to his captain, a man in his thirties named Armen Renthroe. He was shown to his quarters, which he would share with another new lieutenant who lay sleeping in his bunk already.

Reggie quietly undressed and settled into his own uncomfortable bunk, thinking longingly of his bed back at Hadring Hall. He rolled onto his side and tried not to think about Penelope—the tender expression in her eyes as they had spoken that last time.

Morning came with a trumpet blast, forcing him from a deep sleep. He sluggishly dressed himself and presented at the mess in order to receive his ration of oatmeal, bread, and water. The glutinous oatmeal was difficult to get down, and he set aside most of his bread for later, hiding it inside his shako

hat in its hatbox to keep it free from vermin.

His bunkmate grinned and said, “What’s to stop me from stealing your bread?”

Reggie shot him a glance, assessed his light demeanor, and one corner of his mouth quirked upward. “Nothing, except the end of my bayonet, I suppose.”

“Oh! Let me guess—only son of a titled gentleman, sent out into the world to gain a more serious outlook.”

Reggie’s smile faltered and he blew out a breath. “You have pegged me. I am at a disadvantage...”

“Ha! Thomas B. Ventnor, general lazabout second son with a strong need for a comeuppance, at your service.”

Reggie chuckled and stuck out a hand. “Reginald Darrow.”

“There’s a title in there somewhere...”

“Just an Honorable. Father is the Viscount of Loughton.”

“Ah. More than I have, as Father is wont to lecture me. Brother is the lord, I am merely a mister.”

“Well, here it all gets lost, wouldn’t you say? Actions and all that.”

“That is what they say. Time will tell, I suppose. You going to eat that?” He indicated the last half of Reggie’s loaf of bread.

“How long is it supposed to last?”

“A few days, but I always go through mine rather quickly. Have to scavenge about, begging. Most disheartening, don’t you know.”

Reggie laughed and handed over a chunk of his loaf. “Not much of a bread eater. Is breakfast always oatmeal?”

Thomas made a face. “Unfortunately, no. We get an odd gruel at times and none of us is quite sure what is in it. Strange goo, that is.”

Reggie made a face. “Seems they will work us to death but starve us as well.”

“No, there will be food in some form to consume. After a while, you’ll not even notice what you are eating. And then, officers are often invited to dine out, go to balls, that sort of thing. Makes a nice change.”

Reggie nodded, then looked up as another trumpet blast called them to assemble. Thomas rolled his eyes but followed him to the parade grounds, where they took up their places in formation.

A man on horseback appeared, surrounded by the higher ranked officers and the colonel of the militia, Hackett. Reggie stared; the man was large—tall and carrying a solid amount of muscle and fat on his broad frame. He saw that Thomas was staring straight ahead, and quickly averted his own gaze to stare forward as well.

The general, for such it was, rode heavily along the lines of soldiers, peering down at each of them from his superior height. The disapproving gazes of the colonel and the majors accompanied his and Reggie tried his best not to breathe discernably.

The general finished his examination and after a few moments, they were released and allowed to return to their fires.

Reggie glanced over at Thomas and said, "What was that about?"

"That was General Thornton, retired commander of the Yorkshire 3rd Cavalry. That's us. He lives in Margale and rides over to check on us from time to time. Come on, we only have a few minutes before we need to assemble again for bayonet practice."

They trained hard that day, practicing with the musket and bayonet, marching in formation, and going through target practice while on horseback with swords. By the time Reggie carried his bowl of beef broth and potatoes off and retrieved his bread, his body ached, and his head throbbed.

Thomas collapsed on his bunk with a heavy sigh, and Reggie sat on the edge of his, massaging his temples.

"Lord, we do this every day?"

"Yes. In all weather. Dashed uncomfortable in the rain."

"I can but imagine. How long will we be here?"

"Until someone, somewhere, decides that a cavalry is needed. Personally, I am hoping for Spain."

"Spain?"

"Well, I've been to France. Be nice to try somewhere else."

"Why not America?"

"Too rough and tumble for my liking. My uncle fought in the war and tells such tales of discomfort in the colonies."

Reggie laughed. "I've often wondered how much those tales are exaggerated because we lost."

"Mmmm. Don't let my uncle hear you. He has yet to concede that we lost. In his mind, they are the colonies and as such they will remain."

Reggie chuckled and pulled his nightshirt on. A major's voice barked out that it was time for bed and the barracks receded into silence, giving Reggie his first chance to think of home, and Penelope. He sighed roughly, and tried to banish thought of her, but her face and form would intrude in his thoughts.

Impatiently, he rolled over and clamped the lids of his eyes down, as though to shut out the memories. He could not remember when he had first fallen in love with her. It was something that had come along slowly.

He had been forced to acknowledge it during a ball given for his sister. Penelope had just finished dancing with him, smiling up into his face, when another man, Arthur Tarrington, had come along and claimed her. The rage that had rushed through him at that moment had shaken him to his core. He'd had to excuse himself that evening for a while, and had returned to find her sitting alone, her friends already dancing. Sitting with her, he'd listened to her talk about the ball and her upcoming trip to London. He'd savored the nearness and the sound of her voice, watching the play of light over her face and her shining eyes. Sometime as he relived his memories, he fell asleep.

He woke the next morning, stiff from the previous day's activities. When

the cook emptied a ladle of gooey sludge into his bowl, he glanced back at Thomas, who grinned. He managed to force half of it down before scraping the rest off, and washing his bowl out. His friend laughed but did not eat much more.

The day was a repeat of the previous one, except as he retired from the parade grounds for tea, he noted two figures walking uncertainly around. The form and movement of one of the figures caused his pulse to quicken.

“Miss Pratt!” he shouted, and his heart leaped when she turned and raised a hand in acknowledgement.

“Reggie!”

She pulled her father after her and they neared where he stood. Her cheeks glowed pink from the exertion and her eyes fairly sparkled as she gazed up at him. It was all he could do to keep from sweeping her into his arms and declaring himself then and there.

A trickle of sweat began to make its way down the side of his head and he reached for his handkerchief, only to realize he had forgotten it. Instead, he swiped at it with his hand. Suddenly, she was holding out her own little handkerchief to him, and he took it gently from her, dabbed his forehead, then slipped the wisp of cambric into his pocket. If she noticed, she did not say anything.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“You left your dress hat behind, and when your family heard we would be passing, they asked if we could bring it to you.”

Aloysius held out a brown hatbox and Reggie took it with a rueful look.

“I wish I had more things that I had forgotten.”

Penelope smiled. “Well, we are on our way to London for the summer.”

“Country is better in summer.”

“Yes, but Henrietta is there, and Eliza is going.”

“Ah...the three of you together. London had best watch out...”

She giggled, one gloved hand covering her mouth, and he grinned. “How long are you staying?”

Aloysius pulled out his watch and frowned. “We’d best be getting on. Long way to go today.”

“We stayed the night in Margale, then had to wait for your morning exercises to finish.”

“Of course. I’m sorry to see you go.”

“As am I to be leaving.”

They stared into each other’s eyes for a moment before he shook himself and asked, “Miss Pratt, remember that you agreed to write to me now and then?”

“Oh, of course,” she answered.

“Pen! Now!” Aloysius called.

“Goodbye, Reggie!” And she was gone.

He watched her go and said quietly, “Goodbye, Penelope.”

Chapter Five

The coach pulled to a stop and Penelope's eyes struggled open. The carriage interior was dark, and she looked about confusedly. "Where are we?"

"London. Get your things and go to bed."

"Mmm. Yes, sir."

She picked up her workbag and pulled her cloak closed as she stumbled sleepily from the carriage and headed toward the front door. A servant took her cloak and her workbag, and she leaned on the handrail as she ascended the stairs. Her room glowed with light from the fire and a maid left it as she entered, carrying a warming pan.

Penelope sighed in relief as the maid set down the pan and began to help her unfasten her dress, and her corset, freeing her to pull her nightdress on. Once her hair was unpinned, she climbed into bed and was swiftly asleep.

Light filtered in through the closed curtains and she frowned as she woke. The door opened and Edith, the maid, entered and drew the curtains after setting a tea tray on the nightstand. Penelope rose and stretched before pouring a cup and stirring the sugar into it. Drawing her knees up, she sipped her tea and stared out the window at the gray, London day.

Leaning back against the headboard, she sighed, then reached over to set the cup on the tray. Drawing her dressing gown around her, she slid her feet into slippers and headed downstairs to the dining room.

She sniffed appreciatively as she entered. Meals were so much more varied in town. Eggs, kidneys, bacon, as well as toast with three kinds of jam waited for her. Her father had already eaten and was long gone—off to meetings with lawyers and business partners. She ate a leisurely breakfast and perused her mail. A letter from Henrietta waited for her, and she padded to her writing desk in order to pen an answer.

She sat there, staring at the letter sitting to one side ready to go into the post. She eyed the paper and glanced around once before pulling another piece toward her. She dipped the nib of her pen into the ink and then scratched out a letter, feeling rather secretive as she continually cast about to see if anyone was watching.

My dear Mr. Darrow,

Oh Lord, it sounds so strange to call you that! You have always been

Reggie, even though I know that is unnecessarily familiar given your status. Still, I hardly know what to say, except that I am so proud of you for serving the country as you are. When I think of the privations you must be going through, it is enough to elevate your endeavors to near heroic heights.

You will think I rhapsodize, but I assure you I am sincere. But, dear Reggie, you must take care and keep safe, no matter where you are or what you do. I would not have you risk yourself for anything. You must come home to us, safe and sound, at all costs.

I really have nothing further to say. I will be meeting your sister today, and so I might have more to write you later. Until then, take care.

Your friend,

Penelope Pratt

She paused to read over what she had written, and hurriedly directed and sealed it. Then, clutching her two letters, she went in search of the butler.

Jerrod, the butler, was in the hallway and she handed the letters to him before asking, "Did Papa take the carriage, or did he take a cab today?"

"Mr. Pratt hired a cab. He specifically wanted the carriage available for you should you need it."

"Dear Papa," she said. "Thank you, Jerrod. Please have Edith sent to me." Then she turned and headed for the stairs to get dressed.

Sometime later, she headed lightly down the stairs in her palest sage green linen gown with the dark blue pelisse. Her straw bonnet was decorated with sage green bows and blue flowers, and she was pulling on her gloves when the front door opened.

"Mrs. Henrietta Strathom," Jerrod announced.

"Hen!" Penelope cried, rushing forward.

"Pen," Henrietta said, handing her umbrella and pelisse to the butler before embracing her friend. "You are dressed to go out!"

"I was about to call the carriage to go see you!"

"Ah, well. I thought you might be having a late morning after getting in so early."

"Oh yes, you know how those long carriage rides are."

"Indeed. Best to let the horses rest after a day like that. So, Mama writes that you stopped off to see my brother."

Penelope's cheeks deepened suddenly with color.

"How was my profligate sibling?" Henrietta asked.

"He seems well but, Hen, the camp life seems so stifling and rigorous!"

They moved to the settee in the parlor and sat down.

Henrietta sighed. "Dear Reggie. I'm sure he is having a difficult time with it. Not even a valet to take care of him."

"Oh! I had forgotten that. But yet he seemed well dressed. The uniform, indeed, makes him appear so much older and broader somehow."

Henrietta's eyebrows rose. "Well, I shall have to see this. He was always such a dunderhead to me. He's a dear boy, but still a bit of a dunderhead."

“Oh, Hen, no, I cannot agree with that. There is so much more to him.”

“Well, we won’t argue it. How are you? Aside from being affected by the travel malaise.”

“I am well. And you?”

Henrietta leaned back and blew out a little breath. “Oh lord...I begin to understand my mother a bit. Managing a household is serious work!”

“Indeed?”

“Yes! There are the servants and the menus and the coal! Goodness—I hardly have time to myself!”

Penelope regarded her friend shrewdly. “And yet, I think you revel in it, whatever you may say.”

Henrietta’s eyes cut over to her and she smiled. “Well, perhaps I do, but do not stop my complaining. It is a housewife’s prerogative.”

Penelope chuckled, then sobered and asked, “When can we expect Eliza?”

“Monday. Sir William needed to oversee something to do with hay. I don’t pretend to understand it all, but they could not leave Lytchley until Friday.”

“I do hope it will be well with her.” Her delicate face crumpled a little with worry.

“As do I.” Henrietta sighed a little, then looked up. “Well then, what shall we do?”

Penelope leaned forward. “I’m sure you have something in mind...”

Henrietta looked arch. “Well, there is a place on King’s Road to which I have been dying to take you!”

An hour later, they walked arm-in-arm along the shops. Henrietta ducked into one tiny shop with three bonnets in the window and pulled Penelope after her. The sounds from the street muted as soon as the door closed, leaving them in softened silence as they peered around.

“Hello?” A voice from the back of the shop echoed, soon followed by a short, rather square young woman emerging. “Ah!” she said. “Miss Darrow!”

“Hullo, Miss Saunders. I’ve brought my friend along with me.”

Jemima Saunders eyed Penelope’s willowy figure and smiled. “It would be wonderful fun to make a dress for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are so tall, yet thin, that it will be like dressing a mannequin! Oh, I do hope you are here for a dress...”

“Well, Papa did say I could have a new dress once we came to London. Something a little cooler for the summer heat to come.”

“I have just the thing.” She moved to a low counter and went behind it to where bolts of fabric lay stacked in shelves. She pulled out a bolt of embroidered silk organza and then another bolt of pale green. She laid the sheer organza over the green and said, “Can you just see it, flowing down from the waist where a green braid delineates the crossover bodice? That will

give you a little more oomph to the bosom, if you don't mind my saying."

Penelope's eyes went wide. "I do see it, but I don't know that my father will want to. He will want to know how much it will cost."

Miss Saunders named a price, and though Penelope had to catch her breath a bit, she could tell it was not unreasonable compared to other dresses she'd had made. She hesitated, but Henrietta jogged her arm and she quickly said, "All right!"

Miss Saunders winked and picked up a notebook and a pencil, then motioned for Penelope to follow her to a back room where she took quick measurements.

The arrangements made, the girls stepped free and headed for the nearby tea shop.

Penelope gladly sank into the chair and sighed. "Oh, Hen. I don't know how you can shop all day."

"Oh, well, I have always enjoyed it. And yet, nowadays I am always happy to get home."

"Is George gone quite a lot?"

Henrietta's brow creased. "Yes and no. He is gone more than Papa ever was, and yet I know he cuts things short so that he can be home as much as possible. I try to keep myself busy, which isn't hard as I was telling you. But I am ever so glad when he is home."

"And how do you like living in London?"

"Well, once you get past the dirt and the business, it is like living anywhere. Although, we may be buying a place back in Lytchley."

"What?"

Henrietta giggled at her friend's expression. "Ha! I knew that would get you. Yes, we are looking at the old Haverton manor."

"But Hen, it is derelict!"

"Yes, but that is what we like. We can make it ours as we fix it up."

Penelope's eyes were wide. "Oh goodness—I just see what a lot of work that will be."

"We will be coming to Lytchley to see it with William. Papa has offered to help, and William says he knows some workmen in the village. So...there we are."

"Oh, it would be wonderful to have you there more."

"Yes. Now, I need to tell you something, and you must promise to not to tell Eliza."

Penelope leaned forward and Henrietta bent toward her. "I am going to have a baby."

Jaw dropping, Penelope gasped. "What? But when?"

"Probably around February. I would like to be in Lytchley by then."

The girls paid for their tea and rose to leave. Penelope sighed and asked, "Will your house be ready by then? What about servants?"

"We are going to keep it simple at first. In fact, I don't think we will even

open all the rooms in the house right away. George's valet and my maid will come with us. I don't know if we can get our cook to travel up to the country, but we will try. Anyway, that is what we are planning!"

"And you aren't sick at all? Eliza..."

"Oh, I know. No, I am in the best of health. A little disordered from time to time, but nothing excessive."

"Thank goodness for that. Oh, my. You and Eliza will have babies very close in age!"

"Yes, that is another reason to have a house in Lytchley. So the cousins can grow up together." She hugged Penelope's arm, saying, "Now we just need to get you married!"

"Yes," Penelope said. "Easier said than done..."

"Nonsense. I plan to have a ball for you. See if we don't find you a suitor or three."

Penelope's eyes widened at that. Her chest constricted, and Reggie's face was suddenly before her. And yet, there was nothing she could say to his sister. She was certainly not the type of wife his family would be expecting for him. She had little in the way of a dowry and was only descended from anything like aristocratic blood through her mother.

She swallowed and tried to smile as Henrietta pulled her along.

Chapter Six

Reggie woke just before the trumpet blast and swung out of bed to strip off his nightshirt and pull on his light uniform, ready for the day.

A runner came through the barracks, shouting as he went, “Dress regimentals! Prepare to march!”

His chest, never inconsequential, now rippled from weeks of lifting heavy equipment and rapid reloading of muskets. He pulled on his white shirt and breeches, boots, then gently unfolded his redcoat and buttoned it across his front. He loaded his belongings into the pack and grabbed his bowl to get some breakfast before they pulled out. Behind him, Thomas struggled into his breeches and Reggie grinned as he swore.

Later that morning, they assembled on the parade grounds. Reggie stood tall and at attention, waiting for the colonel to announce what was happening. Around them, equipment was stacked in carts while horses were hitched. The cavalry horses held still at the ready; Charger tossed his head as he waited beside Reggie in formation.

Colonel Hackett strode to the front and waited a moment, then called out, “Men of the Yorkshire 3rd Cavalry Brigade, we are being called to assist Wellesley in his crusade to free Spain from the French. As you know, Napoleon has taken control of the Peninsula, and our regent has deemed it necessary for us to assist the Spanish effort. We will make our way to Portsmouth where we will board a ship for Spain. You have your orders; get your gear and form up.”

A stab of excitement went through Reggie at the pronouncement, and he looked over at Thomas, who had gone pale. Together, they led their horses back to their barracks and Reggie grabbed a piece of paper and quickly penned a note to Penelope. He directed it and sealed it, then ran to slip it into the bag of mail going to the post.

Thomas shook his head, but Reggie just shrugged as they finished piling their things into their packs. His musket went on one strap, the bag with bullets and powder went on the other, and his sword at his side. Their kit was loaded into wagons and they mounted their horses and headed out.

As he rode, he fingered the small slip of cambric he kept in his pocket. A bundle of Penelope’s letters lay safe within his saddlebag, tucked beneath a

leather flap. Though there was nothing that could not be read aloud in any company, each word was precious to him.

The journey to Portsmouth took over a fortnight and the last few days were miserable. Rain poured relentlessly from a low-hanging blanket of clouds. Cold and soaked to the skin, Reggie rode even as water streamed into his boots and his horse occasionally slipped in the mud. The contingent of foot soldiers and camp hangers-on slogged away in the mud themselves, and Reggie felt more than a moment of compassion for them.

Portsmouth arose from the gray landscape, the city seeming to open wide as though to swallow them. The graveled road changed to cobblestones and Charger's hooves slipped over the smoothed surfaces from time to time. They rode to a side street, then were split up as accommodations were procured for the night. Reggie patiently waited his turn, then gratefully relinquished his horse to an ostler and allowed himself to be led to the room he would share with Thomas.

Both men quickly divested themselves of their wet clothing, hanging the articles in front of the fire to dry. A supper tray arrived, and a half-dressed Thomas brought it in and set it on the small table by the single window. Both sat down to eat in their smallclothes, shivering a little in the cold and damp air.

"Not quite the glorious campaign I had imagined," Thomas said.

"Well, I didn't invent anything in my anticipation of this career," Reggie said.

Thomas swallowed a bite of his fish and chips, and pointed his fork at his friend. "Imagine if you had a wife following you along in all of this..."

Reggie's mind flew to Penelope struggling through the mud with the others and he shook his head. "I wouldn't let her."

Thomas eyed him. "Who is 'her'? Do you have someone in mind? You've never said, but I see you secreting away your letters."

Reggie's face flamed and he tried to hide it by ducking his head and shoving a chip into his mouth.

Thomas laughed, saying, "Come on, 'fess up! Who is she?"

Reggie swallowed. "Her name is Penelope Pratt."

"Does she know how you feel?"

"God, no! She is my sister's intimate friend."

"So? That wouldn't stop her from being your wife."

"It's a little difficult. She's known me since I was a lad."

"Ah. She still thinks of you as a gangly-limbed youth."

"Something like that."

"Surely she has eyes—you are one of the tallest men in the company."

Reggie shrugged. "I don't know how she sees me. I only know how I feel about her...and I fear my family would object."

Thomas eyed his friend with a compassionate expression. "Well, here's hoping she finds her way to you." He lifted his glass of ale and Reggie

touched his to it with a small clink.

Their ship sat docked in the port town, ready to sail within a few days. Mail finally found them, bringing another letter from Penelope. Reggie waited until he could be alone in the room before opening it.

My dear Reggie,

Strange how easy it is to write that, and how foreign is "Mr. Darrow." I continue being quite happy in London, though of course it is never the same without you. Your sister is threatening to throw a ball for me, and I fear it will be soon. Fear? Yes, for although I enjoy dancing, I do not enjoy strangers, and this will be replete with them.

Enough of that. You are faced with much more serious events. Oh, Reggie, I hope you will take care. I fear for you in open battle. Take no risks, but do your duty. Come home safely. Your family would be devastated to lose you, as would I.

Your loving friend,

Penelope Pratt

Reggie read and reread the short missive several times. It was the closest thing to an expression of love that he had, even if he knew it was simply sisterly love on her part. He folded it carefully, then placed it with the others, tied with the bit of ribbon he had found. He replaced them in the saddlebag that stood in the corner before sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the fire in the low fireplace.

The future loomed ahead of him, suddenly, scattering off in different directions. In one, he saw himself married with Penelope by his side; in another, he fell in battle, struck from the back of his horse, and was left to die on the field. What would that do to his friends and family...and Penelope?

He tried to imagine how he would feel if one of them died while he was gone, but even the imaginary pain was too much to think of. For a moment, fear gripped him—fear of losing his life in a fruitless quarrel begun so far from his home. His breath seized in his chest and he forced himself to drag it in deeply, before letting it out slowly.

A sense of inevitability settled over him. Completely unable to change his future course, he gave himself up to it instead. He knew some had considered deserting, but he would never bring such dishonor upon his family's name. He would see this thing through...to whatever end.

A step sounded outside, and Thomas entered with a clatter. He tossed his greatcoat onto one of the chairs and sat in the other.

"You look serious."

Reggie raised his eyebrows and half-smiled at his friend. "Just contemplating life, don't you know?"

"I saw you got a letter."

"Yes."

"From her?"

Reggie was silent.

“I see. You really should tell her how you feel. Imagine if you die—she might never know.”

“And all the better for her. If I told her, and she didn’t feel the same, she might feel doubly terrible and embarrassed if something happened.”

“Say it, Reg. If you die.”

“Yes, then, if I die. I don’t want her burdened with my...whatever this is.”

“Okay then, what if you don’t?”

“Then there will be plenty of time for me to gauge her feelings when I get back.”

Thomas sighed. “Well, I will leave you alone about it. You know my opinion.”

“Yes, and I appreciate it. But leave it for now, Thomas.”

His friend nodded and then slammed his palm down on the table. “I nearly forgot—the ship’s captain sent word. We’ll be ready to sail on the morrow.”

“I hope Charger does well on the journey over.”

Thomas looked rueful. “I hope I do well. Have you ever been aboard ship?”

Reggie shook his head. “Father took me on a lake once—but that would be very different.”

“Mmmm. Here’s hoping we fare well.”

Next morning dawned bright, and the sunshine straggling through the intermittent clouds cheered the company as they made their way to the dock and waited beside the gangplank. Horses were loaded first, although some resisted stepping on the gangplank and pulled back. One horse panicked and reared up, falling backwards onto the solid wood, and rolling onto the pavement. There was a concerted rush to right the horse, which was discovered to have injured its leg. A shot rang out, and there was a thud.

Reggie averted his eyes and prayed that Charger would load up without incident. When he finally saw his gray mount being led up to the plank, he held his breath. The horse hesitated a moment, then with a little rush he jumped forward and continued onward without incident.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Reggie readied himself to follow his fellow soldiers onto the ship. It felt strange, the slightly rolling sensation of the ground on his legs. He wondered what it would be like once they were underway and truly at the mercy of the sea.

Their sleeping accommodations consisted of an open area below decks fitted with bunks and hammocks. He claimed a bunk by tossing his pack and saddlebags onto it, and then went above deck to stare out at the ocean and get a feel for the ship.

A fair-haired lad rushed by him and vomited over the railing nearby. With a grim face, he left the railing and pushed past, headed toward the bow.

Horses’ cries, snorts, and whinnies rose from the bowels of the ship and

he debated going down to check on Charger. In the end, he decided against it, knowing the bustle and congestion on the ship and not wanting to add to it. He continued forward, his legs slowly acclimating to the constant movement beneath his feet.

Thomas found him standing at the bow, peering out toward open water, and asked, "How are you holding up so far?"

"All right. You?"

"A little disordered. We'll see once we get going."

Reggie glanced at a sailor tying off a rope nearby. "I wonder if they ever get sick, or if they are used to it."

"I would think getting sick constantly would put an end to one's career on the sea."

A shout echoed over the talk and bustle, and the activity suddenly increased even more. The two men looked around at the sailors tying, untying, climbing, and running to and fro. A pair of sails unfurled with a muffled crack as the ship lurched beneath them.

Thomas grabbed hold of Reggie to stay upright, and they braced themselves. More shouts rang from the forecastle and they clung to the railing over the forepeak as the ship sailed out from the dock.

An upwelling of emotion overtook Reggie when the water parted below them. The ship rose with a slight swell and fell again, and suddenly they were rolling every which way and his stomach clenched. Beside him, Thomas turned pale, but Reggie pulled in a deep breath and let it out with a whoosh and a shout.

A young lad in loose pants and a short jacket shot up to them, doffed his cap, and said, "Your colonel is askin' for everyone at t' quarterdeck."

They followed the lad as he worked his way aft, weaving amongst the other sailors. They found Colonel Hackett with his arms raised for quiet. The sounds of vomiting interrupted him, and he simply raised his voice over it.

"Men—we are but a few days away from the meeting point with the rest of Wellesley's forces. I don't need to tell you how vital it is that you be prepared, both physically and mentally, for what lies ahead. Rest up. Next stop is Spain."

Thomas leaned over and whispered, "At least he's no windbag."

"Mr. Ventnor, do you have something to add?" Colonel Hackett's voice rose over the seagulls.

Turning suddenly pink, Thomas said, "No, sir." He stood straight, then as the colonel turned away, he ran to the railing and retched.

Reggie leaned against the railing until Thomas had finished, and said, "Do you need to go lie down, or would you prefer the fresh air?"

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Thomas said, "God, I suppose getting off this damned ship isn't an option?"

"No, but we can get you tucked up with a bucket in your bunk."

"Urgh...I think I am fine here. Somehow..."

“All right. Let’s sit right here for a while.”

Seagulls flew overhead, calling in their piercing voices. Clouds bobbed by as the ship rose and fell with the swells of the sea. Cool air moved over them and, after a few moments, Thomas appeared a little less green.

A high-pitched whistle called out, and men began moving toward midship to go below to the galley.

Reggie bent down to help Thomas up. “You ready to eat?”

He shook his head and clung to the railing.

Reggie clapped him on the back and said, “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Thomas merely nodded and leaned over the railing once more.

The sun had dipped below the horizon when he found Thomas once more. He had moved but little and sat leaning against the railing where Reggie had left him. Reg sat down beside him.

“Feeling any better?”

“I don’t think I have anything more to bring up.”

“That is something. Do you think you might feel better if you ate...”

“No,” came the hasty answer.

“I should quiz you, now I have you at a disadvantage.”

“In what way?”

“You have divined my affection for Penelope. Is there a particular young lady you pine for?”

Thomas smiled grimly. “I wondered when we would come to that.”

“Usually, you are the one talking...”

“Exactly.” He sighed. “There is a girl. Her name is Deborah.”

“That’s an odd name.”

“She’s a Jewess. Her father owns the bank my family use.”

Reggie frowned as he looked at his friend. “Ah.”

“Yes. A real Romeo and Juliet situation.”

“Surely your families aren’t enemies.”

“No, but both our fathers forbid it. So, the cavalry.”

“And Spain. Does she know your feelings?”

Thomas snorted. “She does and reciprocates. Very sweetly. But I am not a Jew, and her father is.”

Reggie was quiet for a few minutes, thinking of Penelope as stars peeked out from behind the thin clouds. “I don’t even know if Penelope feels the same. But I know how my parents would feel. My sister married recently, and it took my parents nearly losing her to agree to her choice. I don’t know if I would have the same luck as she.”

“This Penelope is not an elevated young lady?”

Reggie snorted. “They are a well-off family, and I believe she has some good connections through her mother, but nothing out of the ordinary. She is simply extraordinary in and of herself.”

“So, both of us are crossed in love.” He heaved a sigh, then swallowed precipitously. “Mmm. Not quite, quite.”

Reggie smiled briefly, then leaned back to gaze at the stars slowly coming out as the sky darkened to indigo. Evening had fallen, and somehow that reminded him that Penelope's ball was coming soon. His throat clenched as he thought of nameless dandies dancing with her.

Closing his eyes tightly against the thought, he opened them to stare upwards once again, wondering if Penelope was doing the same.

Chapter Seven

Penelope stood at the top of the stairs, hiding behind the corner of the wall. The main room in Lincoln House had been cleared to make a temporary dance floor. She wore the new gown designed and made by Jemima Saunders and her hands fluttered about her bodice in real nervousness.

A light pattering on the staircase approached, and she glanced up.

Henrietta came toward her, hands out to clasp her own. “Penelope, it’s time.”

“I don’t think I can do this.”

“Yes, you can. I’ll go down and have the quartet start the introduction and you come down the stairs.” She leaned forward to plant a light kiss on her cheek and said, “Don’t trip!”

Then she was gone, and Penelope was left to drag in a deep breath to steady herself.

A few moments later, she heard the little band start the new song and she forced herself to move to the head of the stairs. Applause broke out as she began to step carefully down the staircase.

How she reached the bottom of the stairs, she did not know, but George was there to take her arm and lead her to the center of the floor. A young man came forward and bowed, and they began to dance as other couples came on the floor to join them.

Penelope smiled tentatively up at the young man. They had met a week earlier at a luncheon given by Lady Lamonte—one of the socialites Henrietta had befriended. The Honorable Anthony Sheridan danced well, though a little self-consciously. Penelope could not help but remember the carefree way Reggie danced, as though no one was watching—and who cared if they did?

It ended, and another young man came to claim her. She shot a glance at Henrietta who nodded and looked encouraging, so she went with the dark-haired man to join the dance. His dimples showed as his blue eyes sparkled in the candlelight and she smiled back, hesitantly.

The music lifted her—it was one of her favorite tunes. She hopped and glided and did not see how the exercise warmed her cheeks and quickened her breath through parted lips.

As the song ended, the young man walked her over to the refreshments

and said, "I don't know that you remember me—we were introduced last week at the Edgerly garden party."

Penelope bit her lower lip and said, "Henri DeLonge?"

His fine eyebrows shot up. "You remembered!"

She laughed lightly. "You may well be surprised! I have been introduced to so many people since coming to London. My friend has kept me quite busy!" She looked over to where Henrietta sat with Eliza and gave a small wave with one gloved hand.

"Well, would you do me the honor of the next dance?"

Penelope smothered a sigh. "Of course."

He led her out onto the dance floor as the introduction played and they joined the growing line of other dancers. Penelope's head bobbed lightly in time with the music, and at exactly the right moment she stepped off, her heart lifting as her favorite song played.

Henri danced well enough not to detract from her enjoyment of the dance. And when it was done, she allowed him to lead her to where Henrietta and Eliza sat beaming.

"Oh! Goodness, such a party! Thank you, Henrietta!"

Her friend beamed. "You are so welcome, my dear."

"And you, Eliza, are you enjoying yourself?"

"I am, very much in fact. It is so heartwarming to see so many couples dancing well."

"How are you feeling? Or is one not supposed to ask?"

Eliza grinned and her hand settled on the growing mound. "You are always welcome to ask whatever you like. In answer, we are both doing quite well."

Penelope glanced over at Henrietta, and something in the angle of her head and the way her eyes were alight reminded her of Reggie and sorrow closed over her. She swallowed and forced the smile to stay on her face, even as another young man came to claim her for the next dance. So much had gone into making the ball possible, and she knew she needed to fulfil her role by appearing happy as she accepted all the young men's attentions.

By around three in the morning, most of the guests had gone home, and Penelope hugged Henrietta while the carriage was called to take her home. Her cloak was fastened about her shoulders and she waved to everyone as she was led out to the carriage and helped inside by George himself. The door was shut, and she was alone.

Sighing, she sat back against the seat. She knew in her heart that her friends hoped she would find a beau amongst the men that had been gathered that night. Her stomach clenched at the thought. None of them were Reggie, and she felt the hopelessness of her feelings. The men who had claimed her that night were all "appropriate" catches who would be happy with both her social standing and her eight thousand pounds of a dowry. Any one of them would do.

She fingered the fine edging of her bodice and brushed a strand of hair from her face. The evening had been a triumph, so why was she so miserable?

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Late morning sunshine filtered in through her curtains to wake her long before she had planned to be up. Rising, she wrapped herself up in her dressing gown and stepped down the stairs to see if breakfast was still laid out in the dining room.

It was not, however a maid found her there and promised to bring her a plate of eggs and toast, as well as tea. Penelope sat down to wait for it, and soon enough a salver with letters was set beside her. As she sorted through them, the breakfast tray came in and she set about eating while reading her letters.

One in particular caught her eye, and she quickly opened it.

Dear Miss Pratt,

We are leaving this very moment for Portsmouth, and then Spain. I do not know when I will be able to write you again, however, please think of me now and then and know that I think of you as well. Indeed, it is the thought of you that sustains me at this very moment. Give my love to my sister and this news as well, for I doubt I will have time to write.

Your friend,

Reggie Darrow

It was short, and written in haste, and the direction was written particularly badly. She frowned as she looked at the date and realized it had taken nearly two weeks to reach her.

Reading it through again, she clutched it to her and cherished each word. He thought of her! She sustained him! What were they, but the marks of strong regard—even love?

Forgetting to finish her tea, she rose and went to the writing desk to pen a thank-you to Henrietta and give her the news as well. Reggie was going to war...

Her chest tightened at the thought. She knew so little of war and did not know how to better her understanding. Danger, indeed, was inherent in the word. The possibility that Reggie could be injured or even killed caused her own heart to stop dead in her chest for a beat or two. She could not even write to him...he was beyond her now.

She penned a note hastily to Henrietta, hardly knowing what she said, simply thanking her for the wonderful ball, and then adding the latest news from Reggie. She sealed it and rushed to place it on the salver by the door ready to go to the post.

Standing in the foyer, she considered. What to do?

Fiddling with the buttons of her dressing gown, she walked slowly back and forth. She needed news of the war in Spain...a newspaper! Of course.

Moving swiftly, she glided up the stairs to her room, calling for her maid

as she went. Mrs. Ainsworth popped out of her room at the sound of her calling.

“My dear Penelope—what is it?”

“I need to get dressed to go get a newspaper, madam.”

“A newspaper?! Whatever for?”

“News, of course!”

The maid appeared suddenly, and Penelope waved her into the room after her and shut the door.

She quickly chose a white gown patterned with green and puffed sleeves edged with green ribbon. A green spencer made the reddish-gold highlights in her light brown hair deepen. Then she tied on her straw bonnet with the white ribbons. When she came out of her room, Mrs. Ainsworth was waiting at the bottom of the stairs with an umbrella.

“Surely it isn’t raining, Mrs. Ainsworth?”

“Not at present, but the sky is threatening.”

“We shall be quick, then.”

“Such a damp summer it has been so far...”

Her comments were cut short as Penelope pulled her out the house and down the front steps to the path and out to the street. They walked quickly, with Mrs. Ainsworth puffing above her ample bosom.

“Penelope, dear, can we slow down?”

“I’m afraid the papers will be sold out.”

“Nonsense, my dear. The newsman is always there.”

They turned the corner and headed for the man at the end of the street who stood hawking the latest headlines. “United States of America declares war!” he shouted as Penelope handed over her shilling and accepted a folded newspaper.

Pale-faced, she headed back to the house with Mrs. Ainsworth still huffing nasally behind her. Only when they were safe inside once again did she unfold the newspaper and read the front page relating how President James Madison had signed the declaration of war against England.

Another war! Now, not only was Reggie off fighting the French in Spain, but he could be sent overseas again to fight in America. A tear eased out of the corner of her eye and made its way down her face.

“Oh, why are we fighting for Spain? I suppose we cannot help the United States declaring war against us, but why are we helping another country? Just because it’s the French?”

“My dear, don’t bother your pretty head with politics. Leave it to the gentlemen to work out.”

Penelope looked up. She had forgotten Mrs. Ainsworth, who now sat beside the fire.

“I’m afraid I can’t forget about it, madam. I must try to understand what is happening. One of my friends has gone to war.”

“Well, then, you can rest at ease. English forces always prevail against

the French.”

“And yet, people get hurt—even killed, Mrs. Ainsworth.”

“True, but they die heroes for England.”

“I would prefer that he didn’t die, hero or not.”

But Mrs. Ainsworth’s head had tipped back, and her eyes were closed. A light snore escaped her mouth and Penelope went quietly to the window seat to peruse her newspaper.

She read about Wellesley amassing a fighting force in Spain to help rid that country of the French. Details of battles up to that point were given sparingly, with cold numbers of dead and injured included. Penelope’s hand shook as she held the paper, and she slowly folded it and set it down on the seat beside her.

Drawing her feet up onto the bench, she hooked her arms around her knees and stared out the window as the rain began to come down hard, lashing the glass. Her own tears fell silently as she thought of Reggie slogging on in the rain, cold and wet, and on his way to battle for a cause so few had interest in.

Oh Reggie, she thought. Please be safe.

Going to the instrument, she quietly opened it and played a gentle melody designed to keep Mrs. Ainsworth asleep in the next room. The rain poured down the windows, lashing from time to time to time as her fingers ran over the keys and she sent out good thoughts to her friend overseas.

Her father came home, shaking his umbrella out while a maid hurriedly mopped up the water pooled on the floor. “Penelope?” he called out as Jerrod took his overcoat.

She rose and hurried from the parlor. “Yes, Papa?”

“What was the regiment that Darrow boy went into?”

“The Yorkshire 3rd Cavalry. Why?”

“They are on their way to Spain. Due to join Wellesley’s army.”

“Oh, yes? How did you hear?”

“An old general down at my club in the know. Talked about the overall plans and all the regiments on the move.”

“Is it considered dangerous in Spain?”

“They’re battling the French. Much as we make fun of them, they know how to fight.”

Penelope swallowed, but her throat closed off and she could not speak. Luckily, her father seemed happy to step quickly past her and go up the stairs to his room.

She stared after him, suddenly listless. The very air chilled her, as though warmth had leaked from the house.

Staring emptily at the spot where her father disappeared, she saw his door open after several minutes and he came out, buttoning his jacket.

He fixed his stare on Penelope and frowned. “Penelope, get dressed. Dinner is nearly ready.”

“Oh, of course, Papa.”

She gave a little jump and scurried up the stairs to her room. Edith stood there waiting with one of her evening dresses. She slipped out of her afternoon garment and let Edith drop the pink organza over her head. The buttons were quickly secured, and she swept out of the room and down the stairs.

Supper was quiet. Her father hurried through his meal as he often did and did not notice that Penelope wasn't eating much. Dessert came and went just as quickly.

Finally, she stood, saying, “Papa, do you mind if I go to the piano?”

His foxy face shot up. “What?”

“I'm not hungry tonight. I just feel like playing, that's all.”

He frowned at her but waved her on and she glided past him to the parlor, sitting at the pianoforte and staring down at the keys. A wave of fear came over her and silent tears nearly spilled over. Bending over the keys, she buried her head down on her arms. Aware of her father in the dining room the next room over, she stifled her sobs and swallowed her tears.

Minutes swept by and ticked into time by the large clock in the corner. When her tears were spent, Penelope sat up and wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. Then, to keep the fiction of wanting to practice going, she let her fingers run a few scales and then played one of her favorite songs from when she was young. The notes fell sweet and clear, and helped soothe her anxious soul.

When she was done, she rose and climbed the stairs. Ringing for Edith, she undid her earrings and placed them in her jewelry box. Edith arrived and undid her gown and helped her undress. If she noted the redness around her eyes, she said nothing, simply unlaced her corset and handed her a nightdress. Then she gathered up the clothing and carried it off to clean.

Penelope lay in bed, staring at the empty fireplace. In her mind, she saw Reggie fall in so many ways, and her chest clutched tightly once more.

Sometime in the long night, she fell asleep.

Chapter Eight

The port city of Aveiro, Portugal, grew on the horizon as dolphins led the *Tempest* onward. Reggie and Thomas stood on the quarterdeck with the rest of their regiment.

Thomas had finally overcome his seasickness, while Reggie had found his sea legs weathering the trip well. Both, however, were on edge as they considered what lay ahead of them.

The sea, which had been relatively calm, suddenly seemed to surge and thrust about, causing the ship to buck and fall with the waves. Sailors scurried about, adjusting sails and tying off ropes, while the cavalymen worried about their horses in the hold. Their concern prompted Reggie to rise and head off toward the ladders leading down to the bowels of the ship to check on his horse.

His eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkness as he descended. The smell of urine-soaked hay, horse sweat, and droppings hit him as he stepped off the last rung. He made his way along to where Charger stood, ears up and the whites of his eyes showing slightly as they were rocked roughly to one side. He steadied himself and then reached out to pat his horse, stroking his neck steadily to calm him. Charger pushed his nose into Reggie's hand and seemed to expect a carrot there.

"Sorry, old man, I have nothing for you."

He checked the horse's halter and rope that secured him to the narrow stall. He was about to leave, when he saw a rope on the ground, and the next horse with his hoof caught in it.

Bending down, he felt around. The rope was hard around the horse's hoof, and the horse was nearly panicked as a result. Pulling hard against it, it was all Reggie could do to fit his thumbs around the edge of the rope and push to release it.

As he did so, the hoof, no longer held down by the rope, swung up and caught him square between the eyes, knocking him backward. He sprawled at the feet of another horse, completely unconscious.

Cool air moved over him and then something cold and wet covered his face. He struggled to open his eyes and found Thomas kneeling beside him with a handkerchief pressed to his forehead.

He reached up to dislodge it, only to hear, “Be still, Reg, you took a nasty crack to the head.”

“What is that booming sound?”

“Blood in your ears, most likely. Here...” He removed the handkerchief and took a moistened rag from a sailor standing nearby. “Let me clean you up.”

Reggie struggled to rise while Thomas continued to wash the blood from his face. The world tipped around him and he went still until his senses stopped swimming. A stab of nausea rose in him and he fought it back.

“Ugh. I think I know how you felt when we first got on this ship,” Reggie said weakly.

“Ha! That’s what you get for laughing at me.”

He waited while Thomas helped him to his feet and took the offered rag to hold it to his forehead. “Is it bleeding bad?”

“No, it looked worse than it is. You’re going to have a hell of a bruise, though, and probably two black eyes. How the hell did you get kicked?”

Reggie found his memory foggy and simply shook his head as they worked their way toward the quarterdeck.

Thomas found a bench and lowered his friend onto it before sitting beside him. “Better?”

“Getting there.”

Thomas released a heavy breath. “You scared me—being dragged out of the bottom of the ship all bloody and pale.”

“Darrow!” Colonel Hackett’s voice cut through the noise of the ship.

“Sir,” Reggie said, straightening.

“What happened, Darrow?” He listened as Thomas explained and snorted. “Do you need a medic?”

Reggie shook his head. “No, sir. I am well.”

Colonel Hackett nodded and moved on, leaving the two men to sigh a bit in relief. Thomas examined the cut on Reggie’s brow and declared that it had stopped bleeding. He tossed the bloody rag in a pile of dirty laundry that seemed to be waiting to be cleaned and peered out over the side of the ship.

Aveiro had grown in size, and individual buildings and even people could be seen on the docks. The ship continued to cut through the waves, though sails were being lowered to slow its speed. The rough jockeying eased somewhat as the ship slowed, yet Reggie still had to fight with his stomach. Thomas’ gaze sharpened on him and he suddenly gave a low whistle.

“Your pupils are different sizes—one is huge, and the other is pinpoint small.”

Reggie made to frown, but the action caused a sharp pain in his forehead. “Ouch—well, I can still see, so can’t be too bad.”

As they pulled into the slip, the sailors burst into activity while Reggie and Thomas did their best to stay out of the way. The ship came to a smooth stop with only a slight bump forward and they stood. Reggie senses spun for a

moment, and Thomas reached out to steady him.

“Thanks, don’t know what happened there.”

“You took a jolly hard crack to the head, that’s what!”

They collected their things as gangplanks were put into place and then waited until Colonel Hackett received permission from the captain of the *Tempest* to disembark. The horses were slowly being led off the ship onto another, wider plank. Their frightened calls added to the bustle of people and the creaks of the ship.

The men of the Yorkshire 3rd Cavalry stepped gratefully down the gangplank; the suddenly stable ground beneath their feet felt strange. Some time was spent getting their land-legs back. The horses, too, seemed to have a problem and stepped a little more uncertainly than they were wont.

The men made their way along one of the streets, following a blue-coated Portuguese infantryman. He led them to an inn where they were fed *cozido*—a meaty stew. Reggie liked the flavors, but Thomas wrinkled his nose a bit. The room was small, but comfortable, with a rather high window that let in fresh air.

The next morning dawned clear, and Reggie’s head was much worse. It pounded, and just as Thomas had predicted, his forehead and eyes were bruised. They packed their things and headed downstairs for a quick breakfast where the sight of Reggie’s face elicited much comment.

“You already look as though you’ve been in a fight!” said one of the soldiers.

Reggie smiled wanly. “Just with a horse—not terribly bright of me.”

“Just make sure the French don’t get you,” said another.

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked.

A third spoke up, “They torture prisoners of war. I was there when we recovered a man, and he was nothing but a skeleton with wounds from lashings.”

“No!” Thomas broke out.

“I tell you, it’s true. I’ll slit my own throat before I let them take me.”

Reggie’s eyes grew large, only to ache from the bruising. He tried to relax them, but inside his throat constricted with fear at the thought of being captured and he wondered what he would do if he were in that situation. Could he take his own life? Could he endure months and even years of mistreatment?

He did not know.

It was a sober group of men who headed off toward the parade grounds, where they were to meet up with one of the Portuguese units.

The men were instructed to ride through the city, and Reggie found being on horseback a strange experience with his head pounding and his balance slipping from time to time. Charger had lost some weight, forcing the cinch a little tighter and he seemed a little more sensitive than normal—or perhaps that was just in comparison with Reggie’s dulled senses.

People leaned out of windows and came out onto their front stoops to watch the English in their vivid red coats ride by. Reggie did his best to stare forward, but his gaze was drawn repeatedly to the edge of his vision where people waved and called.

They came to a large field on the edge of the city and saw an immense encampment of soldiers, all in white pants and blue coats. Colonel Hackett called a halt, and the men sat atop horses whose tails swished. The occasional foot stomped as the colonel vaulted down and disappeared into a large tent, presumably to determine their next course of action.

After a time, he emerged with a short, florid-faced man who had an elaborate beard and mustache. He called out to a nearby youth who shot off into the camp. Soon, another soldier on horseback appeared and came to the head of the English cavalry.

Thomas leaned over from his mount and said, "I'll bet that's our guide and translator. Can't understand a damned thing these Portuguese are saying."

Reggie merely nodded, his headache growing worse as they sat in the sun. He adjusted his hat slightly, so it put less pressure on his forehead. The sun warmed them as they sat, and he could feel sweat beginning to dampen his shirt and trickle down the back of his neck. The pounding in his head grew worse, and he saw Thomas shoot him a worried glance.

"You all right?" he whispered.

"Yeah, will be if we can get moving," Reggie grimaced.

The colonel gave a shout, and the horses' ears pricked forward as they were nudged onward. At least the slight movement of air over them provided a cooling breeze; Reggie sucked in a deep breath of relief.

Nearly a week passed as they worked their way across Portugal until they crossed the Spanish border, joining the large force amassing under General Arthur Wellesley. Their own regiment was swallowed by the thousands collected together in preparation for the attack at Salamanca. All that was required was for them to travel the short distance there.

They formed up, swallowed by the other units waiting there. The weather was clear, allowing them to see for miles over the relatively flat land. They finally dismounted in order to set up camp. It was strange to see countryside so devoid of trees. It made the Englishmen feel exposed and vulnerable.

Reggie and Thomas sat in camp, watching the ring of soldiers huddling around the fire. Two days of travel and rough living had followed their joining of Wellesley's forces. The heat was wearing on them, and more than one man had nearly succumbed to it. The cooler evening air was a welcomed change.

"How's the head?" Thomas asked.

"Beastly, but not as bad as it was."

"That is progress, anyway."

"Mmmph. I'll be lucky if I don't fall off my horse tomorrow."

The next morning, they were to engage the enemy near the Spanish town of Arapiles.

Both men pondered in silence, listening to the banter from the fire. Reggie seemed lost in the flicker of the distant flames and Thomas left him to his thoughts.

As the talk died, Reggie turned to his friend. "Have you written your last letters?"

Thomas kicked at the ground. "I have no one to write to."

"Parents, Deborah?"

He was silent a moment. Then, "There is no one who would need to hear from me. What would I say that hasn't already been said? You?"

Reggie glanced up at the sky. "I wrote to Penelope. The letter is in my breast pocket if anything happens to me. I have not sealed it—so you will need to write my fate."

Their eyes met, and Thomas nodded.

Morning spread pink and green from the east. Rising sunlight lit the mounted cavalry red as they awaited their orders. General Wellesley and the other commanders stood within a large tent, discussing their plan of attack.

Thomas glanced over at Reggie. "How's the head?"

"Bearable."

"The bruising is mostly gone now."

Reggie smiled grimly. "Be easier to identify me, then."

"Don't—we'll get through this."

Reggie returned his gaze but did not answer.

Orders began echoing back toward them, and they moved in formation to a point behind the foot soldiers who would go first into battle, with the cavalry attacking after the initial volley of bullets. The enormous army marched inexorably toward the plains of Salamanca. Moving slowly so as not to overtake the foot soldiers, the cavalry followed; some horses tossed their heads impatiently.

Reggie stared at the flat ground around them. Charger stepped forward steadily, alert but calm—much calmer than Reggie felt. He caught Thomas' eye and gave a short smile.

Around midday, they neared a village, visible on a distant hillside. Dust rose and hovered above the distant plain, indicating the waiting French army. The foot regiments fell into position as the French approached.

Reggie waited for the call to load his musket and then to hold it at the ready. They sighted and aimed, listening for the first volley of the infantry to fly first. The French shots whizzed past, and several men of the infantry fell, as well as a few cavalry men. Their own shots rang out, and the battle was on.

The cavalry had time to load and fire three times before the call came to raise their swords. Then they urged their horses forward to ride past the foot soldiers into the charging French army.

Reggie slashed and jabbed as he went, hardly seeing what damage he might have done until he swung his sword at a soldier taking aim. His arm jarred as the sword made contact, saw the spray of red blood spatter outwards

as the man's neck severed. Blood dripped from his sword as he raced past on Charger, streaks of crimson decorating his mount's shoulder.

Nausea struck him, but he stuck to the back of his mount and fought it down. A French cavalryman bore down on him and he ducked to miss the sweeping arc of the lance, swinging his own sword in response. It hit with a loud thunk that was swallowed up in the noise of the fray. The enemy man's screams echoed behind him as Reggie rode past.

Fighting raged around him, and panic rose in his chest. There was no way out, he was surrounded by the blood and the cries of the injured and dying. He urged Charger faster and then felt the world tip as his horse went down beneath him.

He struggled up, pulling his leg out from under his mount. Charger lay on his side, a bullet hole in his chest. Reggie looked over his horse's form, but there was nothing to do. Charger was dead.

He rose and picked up his sword, standing at the ready. A line of fighting marred the horizon, and he limped forward to meet it. His heart beat wildly, the sounds of the clash alive all around him. One man broke through the formation and came for him. Reggie braced for it, sword up as the bayonet held by the other man came for him.

With a slash, he deflected the jab of the bayonet to one side and swung with his left hand to catch his attacker on the jaw. The man went down, only to lunge upward once again with the bayonet directed at him. Reggie deflected it again, and then brought the sword back, slashing his attacker across the chest. Blood appeared across the soldier's white shirt. He brought the bayonet around, but his pull was weaker, and Reggie knocked it loose and slashed once more.

He stood for a moment as the man bled out at his feet. The skirmish seemed to be dying down, and he began to walk toward it.

As he neared, clusters of fighting surged all around him, and he stopped to assess where he would be needed the most. He ran toward a struggle between one of the Portuguese soldiers who was fending off two Frenchmen. Dashing into the fight, he knocked loose the sword of one attacker and went for the bayonet of the second. The Portuguese soldier pressed forward as well, and the two of them battled the man with the bayonet.

Too late, Reggie caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. A soldier ran toward him, pulling a lance free from a downed soldier and jabbing it upward toward him. He swung to deflect it, only to feel it strike his shoulder like a cannonball, driving him backward and onto the ground.

As he hit, the air whooshed out of his chest and he struggled for a moment to breathe. A soldier ran by, pulling the lance free from his shoulder with a jerk, causing him to cry out. His arm went warm and numb, and he struggled to push himself up.

His left arm useless, he rose and found he still had hold of his sword. He stumbled forward, past a man on his knees whose hand was held to a

spreading red spot on his chest. Continuing, he stepped over a dead man and then brought his weapon up as another soldier rushed toward him.

They clashed, sword against bayonet. Reggie deflected and managed to shove the blade down and to the side, but not far enough. It pierced his side, and he brought the sword up as the bayonet was pulled free and shoved it into the man's chest.

The soldier dropped to the ground, his bayonet beneath him. Reggie's hand met the warm, sticky blood welling up from his side and he struggled forward a few steps before falling, lightheaded, to the ground.

Cannons boomed, the balls screamed through the air and then hit as the ground exploded. He looked up, just in time to see a ball coming toward him—falling, hitting... The ground surged... Explosive spray hit him in the face as it all went dark.

Chapter Nine

Penelope sighed. She stared at the sunshine through the window, noting the flowers in the box just outside the window. Her chin rested on the palm of one hand while the other drummed on the windowsill. When a carriage appeared, she jumped up and grabbed a shawl and her reticule on the way out.

The footman stood with the door open. Henrietta and Eliza called to her from within the carriage and she climbed quickly in, taking the open seat. The door was shut and secured, and the carriage jolted into motion.

“Oh, Pen! Eliza! What fun this is!”

“I am so glad we can finally all get together again. It has seemed ages since we were at the museum,” Eliza said.

“And I am taking you both to King’s Road and my favorite shop.”

Penelope and Eliza exchanged looks, but Henrietta waved a hand at them. “Now, now—I know you will enjoy it as much as I.”

“Do we have a choice?” Penelope asked with a smile.

“None,” Henrietta said.

The carriage pulled up and parked on the side of the road while the girls stepped down. Henrietta took charge and led them into a confectioner’s shop where they sampled and eventually bought some intricately decorated cakes that Penelope declared too pretty to eat.

Next up was Miss Saunders’ shop. Eliza ordered a new gown, one with more fullness around the front to accommodate her expanding waistline. Henrietta found a spencer she could not live without, while Penelope pulled on a bonnet and did not take it off again.

When they emerged sometime later, it was time to find a shady spot for tea and to sample their cakes.

“I daresay—I love Cook’s scones, but there is something decadent about a cake,” Henrietta said.

“This is absolutely heavenly,” Penelope said in a rather muffled voice.

Eliza nibbled hers. “Oh, La! It is so hard to trust my stomach sometimes, but these are delightful.”

They wandered into a silversmith’s and made a great fuss over some baby articles. Henrietta picked up a little rattle while Penelope cooed over a tiny spoon. Against Eliza’s protestations, they made their purchases and

happily pressed them upon their friend.

Wending their way through the crowd and back to the carriage, the three sighed happily one after the other and were contentedly silent on the way back to Penelope's home. Once there, they hugged her and watched her trot on up to the steps, where she turned and waved back before going in.

She let out a long breath and handed her shawl to the maid. Then she promptly collapsed into a chair, thinking that shopping was definitely tiring work.

As always, her mind drifted to Reggie and she wondered what he was doing.

It had been three weeks since she had heard from Reggie—that last letter having stated he was going to Spain to fight with the Portuguese. She was aware of every noise around her, tuned to the sound of the post being delivered and hoping it would bring a letter.

The bell rang and she jumped up to answer it, beating the maid by two steps. She opened the door, much to the surprise of the mailman there, and accepted the letters, digging a pair of shillings from her pocket to pay for them. She turned hastily from the door, shuffling through the letters, and pulling two that bore her name.

The first was from Mrs. Welles, but the second looked like Reggie's handwriting. She broke the seal hastily and flipped it open to read:

My dearest Penelope,

I can finally call you that, in this, my final letter. If you are receiving this, then I have fallen and only God knows if I shall ever rise again. Will you cry for me? Somehow, I believe you shall—your tender heart would cry for any man who called you a friend.

I have nothing further to say. But know that my last thoughts were of you; you, who graced my dreams and made my life bearable and worth dying for.

All my love,

Reggie

A note in a different hand had been appended:

Mr. Darrow is in the Hospitalar Baixo Vouga in Aveiro, Portugal, recovering from serious wounds sustained in battle. All questions can be directed to Colonel Hackett of the Yorkshire 3rd Cavalry, Aveiro, Portugal.

Shaking, Penelope rose and stood, considering wildly. She burst into movement seconds later, running for the stairs and calling out, "Edith! Edith!" When the girl appeared, she said, "Quickly, pack my trunk and call Mrs. Ainsworth for me, please."

She spun around and walked to the window for a moment, then turned and paced back as she waited for her chaperone to appear.

Mrs. Ainsworth bustled to the top of the stairs and leaned over the bannister. "Yes, Penelope?"

"We are going to Portugal. Please pack your bags."

Shock registered in the round face of her companion. “My dear, what has your father arranged?”

“Father has arranged nothing, but we are going to Portugal, so please pack your trunk and be ready. I will have the carriage brought round within the hour.”

Mrs. Ainsworth puffed away, uttering little cries of protest as she went, but Penelope knew she would do as she’d been bid.

Going to the kitchen, she found a groom loitering and sent him off to get the carriage ready, then sat and penned quick notes to her father, Henrietta, and Eliza. By the time she was done, the maid was calling for footmen to carry the trunk down the stairs and set it by the front doors. Then, they practically had to seal Mrs. Ainsworth’s trunk from under her fluttering hands in order to take it downstairs.

The trunks were loaded, and Penelope went to her father’s room and took the bundle of paper bills he had hidden there, secreting them in her reticule. She then stepped down the stairs and out the door to the waiting carriage.

It took over an hour to reach the dock, and it was long enough for Penelope to begin to doubt herself. And yet, she held firm. She had to see Reggie, and it was the only way to do so. He might be worse, slipping away without someone to pull him through. Her heart nearly failed her at the thought.

It took some time to find a ship that was headed toward Portugal, and even then, it was a small freighter with only a few passenger rooms available. Penelope paid, then directed her carriage to find a hotel nearby for them to await the sailing of the ship the next day.

Mrs. Ainsworth clucked and mewed as they settled into the hotel and sent the carriage on its way. Penelope felt a moment’s concern that her father might try to come for them, until she remembered that it was Thursday, and he had planned to spend the night at his club on the other side of the city.

They had left their trunks at the dock to be loaded onto the ship and came away with only their bags and reticules. The hotel stood in a seedy part of the city, but Penelope resisted her companion’s frightened bleats and paid, then led Mrs. Ainsworth upstairs to the room they would share.

Despite the ruckus that took place in the hallway sometime after midnight, they slept undisturbed and took a well-appointed breakfast the next day. Penelope had a cab called to take them back to the dock, where they were unceremoniously boarded onto the ship.

A pale man in a striped shirt and loose pants led them down some narrow stairs into the dark space below deck. He pointed out their rooms, little more than closets with a narrow bunk each and a smooth, polished sheet of metal nailed to the wall by way of a mirror. They both checked on their trunks, pushed against one wall of their room. Penelope stowed her bag and dragged Mrs. Ainsworth back up onto the deck.

The sea slapped and sloshed against the boat and the dock. Penelope’s

gaze was fixed on the dock, fearing that any moment her father or someone else might appear to carry her off home.

A shout echoed from the bow of the ship and was repeated in a wave as a flurry of activity exploded over the ship. Penelope's fingers dug into the smooth wood of the railing as the ship slipped her moorings...

Just then, a carriage pulled up, drawn by a pair of sweating horses. The door swung open, and a man stepped out without waiting for the footman—it was George.

Their eyes met across the expanding water and he called her name, but it was lost to the wind and the sounds of the dock. Mrs. Ainsworth fluttered and shook beside Penelope as the dock diminished until George was no longer discernible.

“Oh, Penelope, what have you done?”

“What I must, Mrs. Ainsworth.”

She turned away from the railing and looked over the ship they would be closeted upon for the next few days. It was old, and the wood creaked and cracked with every movement of the waves. Seagulls squawked and cried above them.

Mrs. Ainsworth clutched at her suddenly and said in tortured voice, “Penelope, we are lost!”

“Nonsense, Mrs. Ainsworth. We are on an adventure. My good friend is injured and in a foreign hospital with no one to care for him. I can and must do my part as an Englishwoman.”

“But without your father's permission...”

“I am of age, Mrs. Ainsworth.”

“Only just...”

“And yet, I am. Father will understand. I left him a note. It is too late, now. We are on our way.”

A tiny thrill went through her but was quickly chased by a shiver down her spine as she caught the eye of a rather ragged sailor. He grinned at her and she turned away abruptly, only to see a rather tall, impeccably dressed man before her.

“Miss Pratt, I believe?” He addressed Mrs. Ainsworth, whose gaze shot confusedly at Penelope.

“Yes,” she said, looking up at him.

He adjusted his attention, and his eyes widened appreciatively. “Well, miss. I am Captain Coulter. I simply wanted to make sure you had everything you needed.”

“Oh, er, yes, Captain.”

“In that case, may I request the pleasure of your company at dinner, at my table?”

“Oh, certainly, thank you, sir.”

“My pleasure, Miss Pratt.” He bowed very nicely and stepped away, shouting at a midshipman as he went.

Penelope glanced up at the sun. The afternoon was waning, and she had a moment to consider what she had done. She had left all her friends, had run away from her home, and was now alone on a ship full of strangers in the middle of the ocean. Not only that, she had exposed Mrs. Ainsworth to the dangers of the high seas.

She swallowed and took a step toward the stairs leading down to their cabins. A strong odor of stagnant water and something she suspected was urine met her as she dipped below the edge of the deck. Mrs. Ainsworth huddled behind her and scuttled into her own room, shutting the door behind her. Penelope went into her tiny cabin and sat on her bunk, feeling the odd pitching and yawing of the ship produce a rolling motion that was unsettling to the stomach.

Strange sounds came from next door and she rose, tiptoeing over and knocking gently on the door. The sounds abated and she heard a thick voice say, "Come in."

She opened the door to see Mrs. Ainsworth clutching a handkerchief to her face while the strange, choking sounds punctuated the gloom in time with her heaving shoulders. Penelope's soft heart broke to see her companion sobbing and she settled beside her, one hand gently patting her ample back.

"Oh, Mrs. Ainsworth, please don't cry. It is all well—I am sure of it."

"Oh, my dear, but I have let you do this, and your father will surely blame me, and I will be sent from the house in dishonor."

"No, indeed! I will not let him. This is all my doing, and I will declare as much when next we see him."

Mrs. Ainsworth took in a deep breath and sniffed.

Penelope wrapped her arms around her and laid her head down beside her bonnet. "Oh, madam, please do not despair. We will be well, I know it. The captain is a good-seeming man, and we will dine at his table tonight. Within a few days, we will be off the ship and in a new place. Do try to be brave."

Heaving a sigh, Mrs. Ainsworth said, "Oh, I shall try, truly I will."

The bell clanged sometime later signifying dinner, and the two ladies made their way upstairs and were led to the captain's quarters. A table had been set with all manner of finery, waiting for them. They took their places, and only when they were seated did the captain sit as well.

"I hope you do not mind my inviting my 1st Lieutenant to make a fourth." He indicated a man of about Penelope's age with dark, expressive eyes.

"Not at all."

"Mr. Ledworth is from Yorkshire."

Penelope's attention focused on the young man with the soulful eyes. "We have a country home in Yorkshire. A small village called Lytchley."

His eyebrows lifted and he became animated. "Lytchley? Well, do I know it! I hail from Winder, just a few miles away."

"I live on the Winder road from Lytchley. Such a small world it is," Penelope declared.

"How fortuitous," Captain Coulter said.

The ship tilted slightly, sending the dishes sliding, but the ridge built into it around the edges stopped them in their tracks. Supper, though plain, was satisfying and Mrs. Ainsworth seemed definitely more at ease with their situation after a time.

"So, Miss Pratt, what takes you to Portugal?" Mr. Ledworth asked.

Penelope swallowed her bite of bread and said, "A dear friend of mine was injured in a battle in Spain. He is in a hospital there, and I am going to see him." She masked her expression with ingenuousness but could see they were surprised.

"It's a long trip for a friend."

"Well, I have known him for much of my life. It seemed the right thing to do."

The two men were obviously too well bred to question further her motives, but the glance they shared spoke volumes. Penelope pretended not to notice, and dinner continued after a short silence.

"I am quite surprised at the comforts available on a ship," Mrs. Ainsworth said.

"What did you imagine we lived like?" Captain Coulter asked with a smile.

Mrs. Ainsworth's broad, placid face went blank. "I cannot honestly say I imagined anything. But it surprises me to sit down at a table like civilized folk."

"Your view of civilized folk must differ from mine. I have met many such who do not sit down to a table to eat."

Mrs. Ainsworth appeared confused by this and said with a worried expression, "I'm sure I meant no disrespect."

"Not at all, dear lady. I am simply making a statement. We meet all kinds in the merchant marines."

"Yes, of course," she said, her brow furrowed in consternation.

Penelope took a sip of wine and set her glass down. She rose and said, "Well, Captain, Mr. Ledbetter, I will wish you good night."

They stood and bowed to her as she and Mrs. Ainsworth retreated from the room.

Mrs. Ainsworth stuck close by her side while they walked the short distance to the stairs leading down to their quarters. She tried to ignore the stares from the crew members they passed as they went. A boy came up to them before they set off down the stairs and handed her a candle.

"'ere, miss. You can light t' candles in your rooms wi' this."

"Thank you," Penelope said. She took the candle, holding it out before her.

They descended into the darkness and went to Mrs. Ainsworth's quarters

first, lighting the candle in its holder on the wall.

“There, you should be most comfortable tonight.”

“Penelope, dear, push your trunk in front of the door as I will do. I do not trust the ruffian crew.”

Trying not to smile, Penelope nodded. Sure enough, she heard the scraping of the trunk against the floor as soon as the door closed. She went into her own room and lit the candle there. After sitting on her bunk for a moment, she pulled her trunk out and pushed it against the door.

With a wry twist to her mouth, she undressed, having a difficult time with her corset. She made a note to call Mrs. Ainsworth the next morning to help her. Then she climbed into the narrow bunk and pulled the wool cover over her.

The ship rocked and rolled gently, but persistently. She found it soothing in a strange way as it rocked her slowly to sleep.

Chapter Ten

Darkness surrounded him and fever gripped him as he lay on the narrow cot. His face was bound, with only a hole in the bandage for his nose and mouth. He could see nothing, and the bandage reached around his head, covering his ears, and muffling the sounds around him. Still, he heard footsteps going by, the sounds of cots creaking and hushed voices.

Hospital? Why would he be in a hospital?

“Lieutenant Darrow?” a voice said gently.

“Yes?” Was that rough voice that cracked really his?

“Do you know where you are?”

“No?” It hurt to shake his head even slightly.

“You are in a hospital in Aveiro. You were badly wounded in battle.”

“Cold...”

“That is the fever. You have been delirious for some days.”

“Hurt.”

“Yes, that is to be expected. We will give you a little laudanum to help.”

He was lifted to a partial sitting while a glass was held to his lips. He drank a bitter solution and, after a few minutes, a rush of euphoria filled him as the pain receded somewhat. He leaned back, his head spinning from even that small exercise.

“Penelope...” he whispered hoarsely, his thoughts scattering about in fragments of happy images of her.

“Who?”

“Nothing.”

He slipped into a restless sleep.

Days passed as he struggled in the grip of fever. Laudanum gave increasingly smaller rushes but managed to keep the worst of the pain at bay. He endured bandage changes around his side and in his shoulder, and once again when the bandages were cut from his face.

The cold edge of the scissor slid beneath the bandage, sliding along his cheek. A snipping sounded loudly in his ear as the bandages were cut free. Blinding light accosted him, and he turned away from it. Everything was blurred and smeared, and he closed his eyes tightly.

Hands gently moved his head from side to side and a voice said, “Open

your eyes.”

Struggling, Reggie did as he was told. Again, he could see nothing save light and dark shapes. One of the light shapes was very close to him and he felt fingers pry open his lids.

“Eyes are still scarred. Face wounds are healing. Lieutenant Darrow, do you remember what happened?”

He shook his head, and fresh bandages were applied. The relief of having the light cut off from his eyes was palpable, and he relaxed a little as the darkness returned. Footsteps moved away and he was alone.

Blind? Is that what all of it meant? He was blind? How was he to face a life without sight?

He groaned, inadvertently rolling onto his damaged side and the jolt of pain that shot through him brought a cry to his lips. He heard steps approach and cool hands were on him.

“Reggie? Oh my...is it really you?”

“Yes, who are you...?”

“It’s me, Penelope. I came as soon as I could.” Her hand gripped his and he held onto it tightly.

“Pen...Miss Pratt.” He made as though to sit up, but something stabbed through his abdomen and he slowly lay back down with an agonized cry.

“Hush, lie still. I am here. I will stay with you.”

His hands rubbed hers softly all over. “It is you...these little hands. Do I look truly awful?”

“You look truly hurt. It breaks my heart. But it fills me with joy to see you alive.”

“My parents?”

“I don’t know. I wrote to them telling them of your letter. Who sent it for you?”

He shook his head. “It must have been Thomas—yet I have not heard of him since I awoke two days ago.”

“Shall I go search for him?”

“Presently, do not leave me just yet. And you really are here, safe?”

“I am safe and well. I brought Mrs. Ainsworth to keep respectable.”

He chuckled, then groaned as it caused a stab to go through him. “Mrs. Ainsworth, of course.” His hand tightened on hers and he said, “But, you shouldn’t have. There is a war...”

“I know. We had a skirmish at sea on the ship we sailed on.”

“What?” Tiring quickly, he struggled to remain awake.

“Shhh. I will tell you later. Just sleep.”

He sighed and, after a few moments, his grip went lax.

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Penelope slowly released his hand and rose. Tracing a path along the many beds, she worked her way back to the front atrium where Mrs.

Ainsworth sat.

“Oh, my dear, did you find him?”

“Yes, he is cruelly injured. We will have to remain for a time.”

“Mmmm. I suppose so. The hotel is decently appointed. I only wish I had brought my knitting.”

“Perhaps you can find a shop that carries knitting pins and wool?”

“I did pass one nearby. Would you mind terribly if I went and looked?”

“Not at all. I will simply stay and help nurse Reggie as much as possible. They are stretched very thin here.”

Mrs. Ainsworth stood, patted her on the cheek, and then bustled off. Penelope watched her go, then turned on her slippered heel and walked back to where Reggie lay, still sleeping. She found a chair and dragged it quietly over to sit in.

Sometime later, a cart with bowls and a cauldron of soup was brought round. Gently, she woke Reggie and collected a bowl for him. The kind attendant gave her one for herself, saying something in Portuguese. Penelope could only nod and thank them in English. She carried the bowls back to Reggie’s bedside and helped to prop him up. Slowly, she held the spoon to his mouth, and he drank from it.

“I will probably make a great mess.”

“Then I shall clean it up. Each bite is evidence you are alive and improving.”

He took another bite, swallowing it quickly. “I feel actually hungry today. It must be having you here.”

She smiled and blushed, grateful at least that he could not see her. When he had finished the bowl, he lay back, sighing. “The flavors are strange here.”

She tasted the soup and agreed. “Indeed, but I am grateful for it.”

He reached for her and she quickly grasped his hand. “I am grateful for you.”

She set her bowl aside and gripped his hand with both of hers. “Oh, Reggie!” Her eye caught the play of muscles in his forearm as he twisted to get a better hold of her hand. “I must write to your parents and tell them you are improving.”

“Yes, I suppose you must.” The hand that held hers loosened its grip and she collected the bowls and rose.

“I’ll be back. I promise.”

She made her way back to the front of the building and spoke with the man seated at the small desk there. He knew no English, but when she imitated writing a letter, he grinned and pushed a piece of paper and an inkstand toward her. He cut the nib out of a feather in a nearby stand and handed it to her.

The letter was quickly completed, and the gentleman even sealed it for her and placed it in a stack of other letters. She held out one of her English bills, but he shook his head. She gathered the Portuguese were only too happy

to assist the English who were helping to rid their neighbor of the French.

Mrs. Ainsworth was happily casting on her new knitting pins, so she wove back through the beds until she reached Reggie. He turned his bandaged face to her, and she asked, "Reggie, who is this Thomas you believe wrote to me?"

"Thomas Ventnor. Do you think he is here somewhere?"

"It is worth checking, don't you think?"

"Yes." He pushed himself up slightly and turned to her. "Could you look?"

She squeezed his hand and stood. "I'll be back in a moment."

Rising, she cast about for someone and began to make her way through the hospital personnel searching for someone who spoke English. All around her, she heard Portuguese, but suddenly a voice stuck out and she followed it. A tall, dark-haired man with vivid blue eyes met her.

"*Com licença*," he said as he pushed past.

"Wait a moment—do you speak English?"

Arrested, he stopped and spun to peer more closely at her. "You're English! Where did you come from?"

"London. I am here caring for my friend, Reggie Darrow."

"Ah. Lieutenant Darrow. Yes. How can I help you?"

"We are trying to find a friend of his, Thomas Ventnor. Do you know of him?"

He shook his head. "But, you can check with the *receptionista* at the front. He has lists of all the soldiers brought from Salamanca. If he doesn't know, then try the Office of the Army. It is in Aveiro, proper."

He was gone, leaving her with a bewildering amount of knowledge. She went first to the receptionist and after some trying attempts, managed to communicate her need to see the patient lists. Name by name, she pored over them, noting the number who were marked as deceased from some cause. There was no Thomas Ventnor.

Next, she asked where the office of the English army was. A gabble of Portuguese exploded, and her eyes flew wide. He smiled, then calmly drew a map, and handed it to her. She nodded, and carried it through the front doors, still noting Mrs. Ainsworth knitting happily.

The streets bustled with people. She followed the map uncertainly, until she caught sight of a red coat in the distance and headed toward it. Weaving through the masses, she lost sight of it, then caught another glimpse and adjusted her direction.

Suddenly, the red-coated soldier was in front of her, and she paused, breathless. "Sir, oh sir—can you tell me where the Office of the Army is?"

He spun around at the sound of her English and stared at her for a moment. "Yes, actually, I can take you there." He led her through the milling people to a two-story building where another soldier stood at attention beside the door. "Coming through, Lafferty."

He deposited her in front of a desk and bowed as he left. A weary-looking, balding gentleman sat behind it, blinking queringly at her.

“Yes, miss?”

“I’m trying to find a Thomas Ventnor. He was with the Yorkshire 3rd Cavalry at the Battle of Salamanca. My...particular friend, Reginald Darrow, was wounded there and is very desirous to find his friend.” She bit her lip, knowing it sounded confusing.

The man frowned at her, then pulled out a ledger and handed it to her. “You may look through this.”

She carried the ledger to a chair and sat, opened the book, and began to scan the names listed there. Finally, she found it, only to find the notation, *died of his wounds at Salamanca*.

Had he written to her first, then died? Had someone else written? She would never know. And now she must tell Reggie that his friend was dead. A tear spilled forth and splashed down on the page, smearing the ink writing there. She handed the ledger back to the weary man and headed out, studying the map she still clutched in her hand.

The sun had sunk low in the sky during the time she had been in the office. She slowly made her way back to the hospital and checked on Mrs. Ainsworth, promising to join her at a nearby restaurant for supper after looking in on Reggie.

Reggie was sitting up with an attendant trying to feed him. Penelope quickly took over and the attendant happily moved on to the next patient.

He ate in silence for a few minutes before saying, “Did you find out anything?”

She set the spoon down in the bowl. “Yes, Reggie. Your friend died. I’m so sorry...”

Reggie leaned back, his mouth pressed grimly closed. His hand gripped hers and he was still for several minutes.

“For once, I am glad of these bandages so you can’t see me cry.”

She could only squeeze his hand.

As she leaned toward him, the English doctor appeared at the foot of Reggie’s bed. “I see you have a friend to cheer you. That should help you improve.”

“I think she already has.”

“Well, let’s take a look, shall we?”

Penelope stood back, allowing the doctor to come near and bend over Reggie. He first checked the wound in his side and seemed satisfied with whatever he saw there. Penelope tried to turn away but was arrested by the musculature of Reggie’s exposed abdomen and chest. The gash to his side was closing, but still appeared frightening while his shoulder was deemed much improved, and the doctor moved to Reggie’s face.

He cut the bandages free, and Penelope nearly gasped in horror as they fell aside. The cannonball had caused dirt and shrapnel to practically explode

in Reggie's face, which was now covered with red streaks and cuts. His eyes remained pressed closed, but the doctor forced them open, and she thought there was some redness. Whatever the doctor saw made him grave, and he quickly motioned an attendant over to rebandage his patient.

"Well, doctor?" Reggie asked.

The doctor blew out a breath and said, "Your stomach and shoulder wounds are healing well, as are the superficial cuts to your face. Your eyes, however, remain inflamed and I don't know why they are not improving more."

Reggie was silent for a moment. The doctor made sure the bandages were being reapplied before he turned away in search of another patient. Penelope settled beside him and reached for his hand, but Reggie resisted and pushed her away.

"Reggie, what's wrong?"

"You can't want to be around a blind man. Damn it all, I'll be useless, Pen!"

"Don't say that, your eyes will get better. Just wait!"

"And if they don't? I'm blind, Penelope. Blind!"

"And what if you are?"

"I'll not drag anyone into the life of a cripple!"

"You aren't crippled! Certainly not!"

"As good as, Penelope. Just go!"

Penelope stood and picked up her shawl. "I'll go, because I promised Mrs. Ainsworth dinner. But I will be back tomorrow."

With that, she spun and walked away, though a tear sparkled in her eye as she went.

Chapter Eleven

Penelope stood at the window of the room she shared with Mrs. Ainsworth. The narrow street lay below her, shops and businesses spreading out on either side of the hotel front. Sunlight peered over the edge of the buildings, casting long shadows in the early morning.

Biting her lower lip in determination, she spun and picked up her reticule and shawl before heading out the door. Her companion followed, huffing a little from precipitously rising from her chair to set off after her young charge. Together they slipped down the staircase, through the rather colorful lobby and out into the street.

The hospital was bustling when they arrived. Breakfast was being served, and Penelope removed her gloves as she walked toward Reggie, picking up a plate of bread, ham, and cheese with a dollop of jam on the side. Having just had such a breakfast, it was not a surprise to her.

She made her way to Reggie and sat down beside him, saying, “Good morning,” as she did so.

He was sitting up that morning, though there was a crease of pain between his eyebrows. Penelope reached out and placed the plate of food in his hand.

“It’s bread, ham and cheese. Careful, there’s a bit of jam next to your thumb.”

He almost smiled. “I shall be wary of that, then.”

“Are you in a better mood?”

“Perhaps after I have had some tea—or coffee, I should say. Tea is a little more difficult to come by.”

Penelope got up and retrieved a cup of milky coffee from the cart and returned to place it in Reggie’s hand. He sipped it and made a face, but took another sip.

“I’m glad to see you up.”

“Couldn’t take lying flat on my back any longer. Worse than the pain of sitting.”

“Does it hurt very much?”

He nodded.

Suddenly, a commotion broke out behind them and Penelope spun to see

what was happening. The door to the main room burst open, and Lord Loughton strode in with Lady Loughton by his side. Reggie cocked his head as though recognizing his mother's voice rising above the general chatter around him.

"Penelope..." he started to say, but Mrs. Loughton had caught sight of Penelope and stopped short.

"You! What are you doing here?"

"Mother, please remember where you are," Reggie said calmly.

"Oh, my poor boy—look at you! What has happened?"

Lord Loughton watched his wife flutter about as Penelope rose and tried her best to disappear into the wall. Her only path of escape was cut off by the Loughtons.

Reggie's father frowned at her and asked, "Can you tell us what happened?"

"He was stabbed in the shoulder and in his side. Then, something struck him in the face. His vision is impaired."

"Call it like it is—I'm blind."

Lady Loughton screamed and made as though to faint. Lord Loughton caught her before she actually fell to the ground.

"Dammit!" he grunted as she fanned herself weakly.

"Oh! My boy..."

"The doctor is optimistic that some of his sight will return."

"Where is this doctor?" Lord Loughton said as he righted Lady Loughton.

Penelope spied the doctor toward the end of the hall and nodded toward him. "He is there, with another patient."

The Loughtons bustled off toward him and Penelope quickly grasped Reggie's hand. "I must go. I will try to come back later."

He gripped her hand for a moment and nodded, then she was free and practically running from the room. She gathered up Mrs. Ainsworth from the lobby and they emerged into the warm sunshine of the Aveiro day.

"Was that the Loughtons I spied?"

"Yes, it was. Oh! What must they think of me!"

"Did they say anything?"

"They said plenty of nothing. Perhaps we should go home now."

"Oh yes, Penelope! Your father will be so worried."

"No, I have written him and told him where I am. Now that I have seen Reggie, and his family is here, it may be time for us to go." She walked slowly along the main street toward the sea.

"Oh, my dear, do we have to take a ship back to England?"

"I don't quite see how we will get home without one."

They were quiet, moving through the growing crowds. The ship masts appeared over the buildings, the closer they got to the docks. The smell of fish and seawater filled the air as they neared the ocean. Casting around, they saw

the familiar form of the *Tempest* sitting in her slip.

Mrs. Ainsworth clucked and lifted her skirts above the water coating the surface of ground. Penelope edged around a large bin filled with fish and picked her way resolutely toward the *Tempest*.

The ship was quiet as they climbed the gangplank and stepped onto the deck. Penelope called out, then stood waiting. Eventually, Captain Coulter himself came out from the captain's quarters, his handsome face twisted in surprise.

"Miss Pratt, Mrs. Ainsworth, how may I help you?"

"Sir, we need to return to England. Do you know of any ships going there?"

"Well, as it happens, once the men are back, we will be leaving for Portsmouth before sailing to Ireland."

"Portsmouth! That's miles away! Can't you put us down in London?" Mrs. Ainsworth squeaked.

Penelope hushed her with a movement of her hand. "Of course, sir. Well, we would like to join you, if that is all right."

"Naturally, that would be perfectly fine. But, how will you get home?"

"We shall simply travel by Post to London. I thank you, sir. When should we board?"

"I expect to cast off at noon tomorrow. The crew will be straggling back tonight sometime, I expect."

Penelope nodded. "Thank you, we will see you tomorrow." She turned and stepped lightly down to the dock with Mrs. Ainsworth in tow.

"Oh, Penelope, my feet!"

"If you will wear those shoes, madam, you will suffer."

"I did not expect to do so much walking. I don't have nice boots like you."

"Perhaps we should see to that." She sighed as they headed back toward their hotel.

She then spoke to the manager about leaving the following day and arranged for someone to take them and their trunks to the dock in the morning. The afternoon spread out before her, and she collected her companion and stated her intention of returning to the hospital.

Mrs. Ainsworth groaned with each step as they made their way back. Once there, Penelope settled her in her window seat and wove through the people as she worked her way back to Reggie. She found him alone, while the Loughtons stood on the far end of the room with the doctor.

"Hello!" she said softly.

He turned quickly toward her and reached out with his hand. She took it and he said, "You're back! I thought Mother had frightened you off."

"Mmm, well, she did. But I came back to say goodbye."

"What? No!"

"Yes, we must. I have settled it with the ship. We will return and face my

father, who is bound to be very angry with me.”

His mouth became set, and he sighed. “Yes, I can see how that would be. I think my parents are discussing taking me home with them. I wish they had stayed at home. I am no longer the child I once was.”

His forceful voice quite shook her, and her hand disappeared into his as he gripped it tight. Penelope looked up to see them coming toward her, and tried to pull her hand away, but was too late. Lady Loughton’s stern eye fall upon her and the way her mouth twitched, she was certain to have seen Penelope’s hand in Reggie’s.

“Miss Pratt, shouldn’t you be on your way home?”

“I have come from the docks and made arrangements, ma’am.”

“Excellent. If you will excuse us, we need to discuss some things with Reginald.”

“Miss Pratt, please...” Reggie began.

“She is leaving now. Goodbye,” Lady Loughton stated.

Penelope rose and Reggie reached out to grip her hand. “Mother, you will not talk to Penelope like that.”

“Penelope, is it? I will thank you to watch your manners and not be overly familiar with acquaintances.”

“She is rather more than that!”

“Reginald!” His father’s brusque voice rose over them all.

An uncomfortable silence fell, and Penelope saw that eyes throughout the hospital were turned toward them. Her gut twisted in embarrassment and she looked down, desperately wishing herself away.

Unwilling to stay behind any longer, Penelope rushed past Lady Loughton.

Behind her, Reggie’s words were loud and clear. “Father, Penelope has stood by me here, and I will not have her disrespected.”

“Son, you put her reputation further in jeopardy by speaking so of her,” Lord Loughton said sternly.

That was the last Penelope heard, then was beyond them and she breathed a little sigh. She collected Mrs. Ainsworth and together they took an early dinner before retiring into their hotel room.

Morning arrived, gray and overcast. Penelope rose, struggling against the heaviness in her limbs and the tears threatening like the rain. Dressing, eating breakfast, packing, waiting for the carriage to take them to the docks. Mrs. Ainsworth chattered, and she replied with monosyllabic answers. All her mind could wrap itself around was that she would no longer see Reggie.

At the dock, a couple of sailors from the *Tempest* recognized them and came down to help carry their trunks to their old rooms. Once in there, she shut her door and sat on the bunk and gave herself over to tears.

What had she done? Run away from her home after a man who could never claim her. She had humiliated herself in front of him and his family—and soon, she had no doubt, in front of Lytchley as well.

After a few minutes, she heard voices out in the common space before the rooms. She hastily dried her tears so as not to betray them to strangers. Rising and straightening her gown, she opened the door and stepped out.

Only to come face to face with Reggie!

Her mouth dropped open, and his did the same, only twisted with pain as he cried out, unaware that she was there. He stood weakly between two sailors who were helping him to the cabin next to hers. Moving slowly past her, she rushed to help him as they set him down rather suddenly onto the bunk.

“Reggie!”

His hand reached up and grasped hers. “Penelope! What are you doing here?”

“We came to Portugal on the *Tempest*.”

He tried to smile but was taken by a spasm and leaned back instead, his breathing shallow. Just then, Lady Loughton came down the steps.

“Harold! This will absolutely not do! Surely there must be another ship.” Her eyes fell upon Penelope and she went red. “What are you doing here? I will not have it, do you understand? You will pack your bags and go.”

“Mother, you will not speak to Miss Pratt like that. She was here first. This is the ship she arrived in.”

“Do not you talk to me like that! I don’t care how she came to be here, she can take herself off.”

“No, ma’am.”

Lady Loughton stopped in her tirade and stared in disbelief as Penelope stood her ground.

“I am staying. My things are here, and I was here first. If you dislike it so much, you may leave.”

“I will tell your father how you behaved...”

“I have told him myself. I wrote to him before I left and since I arrived. He may not like it, but he is most certainly aware of it.”

“You will stay away from my son during the voyage. Do you understand?”

“Your son is of age. If he chooses to speak to me, I may decide for myself whether or not to speak back.”

Lady Loughton turned an unbecoming shade of purple, and then went into her tiny cabin and slammed the door shut behind her. Her maid went to follow her, then was forced to knock for entrance.

Reggie groaned, and Penelope quickly bent to help him lie down. She adjusted his pillow and he reached again for her hand. “Please don’t listen to her.”

“No. She is a mother concerned for her son.”

“Yes, though that is no excuse.”

Penelope tried to smile and then pulled her hand from his reluctantly. “I should go. I’ve been denounced.”

“As you said, I am of age now. Just.”

She stepped out as he closed his eyes in pain. "I will go find your medicine—I am sure you need the laudanum."

Rising with a squeeze to his hand, she went in search of one of the Loughton servants. She found Lord Loughton's manservant and asked if he knew where Reggie's medications were. He nodded and opened a bag he was carrying.

"He needs his laudanum now," she said, and the man carried the bag to Reggie's cabin.

She followed him with her eyes and resisted the temptation to go after him. Instead, she climbed the steps until she was on the deck. The breeze had picked up and she wished suddenly for her shawl but knew she would not risk Lady Loughton for it. Instead, she wrapped her arms around herself and walked to the railing to watch the men ready the ship for sailing.

"Miss Pratt, you will catch a chill," a voice at her elbow cautioned.

She glanced up in surprise at Captain Coulter. "Sir, I forgot my shawl, but I will fetch it presently. I am engaged in watching your men."

He nodded, glancing about him at all the activity. "It runs like a clock at its best, but it isn't always at its best. In fact, I must leave you. Forgive any shouting you may hear."

He took several steps away before bellowing up into the shrouds at some hapless sailor. Penelope turned back to her perusal of the sea.

Dinner was uncomfortable. Captain Coulter deemed it necessary to invite all his paying guests to his cabin for supper, and Lady Loughton was still too angry for civility. She chose instead to pretend as though Penelope was not there. Reggie remained, of necessity, in his cabin.

"I suppose we cannot prevail upon you to sail for London," Lady Loughton said to the captain.

"I am sorry, no. We have a schedule that we must make at all costs. Portsmouth it must be."

"Well, we shall have to hire a carriage to carry poor Reggie home. I wish the *Constantinople* was available still, but they are going on to Gibraltar."

Captain Coulter did not reply. Lord Loughton tasted his fish and stopped chewing for a moment, then swallowed painfully and took a bite of bread. Penelope deduced he had found a bone. Lady Loughton took a bite, then set her fork down and did not pick it up until the next course.

"How many days to Portsmouth, do you think?" Lord Loughton asked the captain.

Their discussion became technical dealing with prevailing winds and the state of the seas. Penelope kept her head down, thinking of Reggie and hoping he was well. Mrs. Ainsworth enjoyed her meal and was blessedly quiet.

The ship rolled a little, and Lady Loughton turned a pale shade of green. She rose precipitously and made her way outside.

Captain Coulter continued to talk as though nothing had happened, though Lord Loughton looked around and said, "Hortense?" He wiped his

mouth with his napkin and went to follow her.

Mrs. Ainsworth watched them go and said calmly, "I am so grateful for my stout constitution. I believe I get it from my father, who was a naval captain."

"Indeed? I did not know you hailed from a naval family," Captain Coulter said.

"Oh, well, it was only my father. And he retired at a relatively young age. After the war with the colonies, that was."

Penelope smiled at her companion, then looked up as Lord Loughton came quickly back to the table. He picked up his fork and hemmed a bit. "Lady Loughton isn't quite, er, well."

Captain Coulter maintained a seamless discussion for the remainder of the meal, and even after she had left, the sound of his voice followed her as he poured the after-dinner port for himself and Lord Loughton.

As she crept down the stairs, she saw a light coming from Reggie's door. It stood slightly ajar, and she paused beside it, knocking gently. The unmistakable sounds of Lady Loughton in distress could be heard coming from her cabin a couple of doors down.

"Yes?" Reggie called out, and she went in.

The candlelight lit upon his pale face, but the plate on the floor beside him was clear of everything except a few bones. She placed it outside his door and kneeled beside him.

"Are you well? Do you need anything?"

He shook his head. "No. Higgledon, Father's valet, will return to give me my next doses. I am a bit woozy still from the laudanum. I can hear Mother is not well."

"Yes, she took ill at dinner."

"I feel for her. Many in my regiment were ill on the trip over. Even my particular friend..." His voice failed him at the thought of Thomas.

"I should go. Your mother would be most displeased to find me here."

He turned his face toward her. Most of the bandages were now gone, and the healing scars were still red and stood out lividly on his face. She reached out and gently traced one and he caught her hand.

"Do I look truly terrible?"

"No. You look like you have been through a war. It ages you, Reggie. You have a different air about you now."

"Being blinded..."

"That is mostly temporary."

"You don't know that. It has improved but little since the battle."

"I will continue to believe the best. But whatever happens, Reggie, it does not change who you are."

"But it does change what I can do. I may be little more than a cripple, being led about like a dog. Unable to provide for a family. No!" he forestalled her. "I can't face it, Penelope. I know your tender feelings will not let you

voice anything like regret. But I must face the truth, harsh as it is. You should go, and don't look back."

"I may go, Reggie, but I will look back and I will come back. Again, and again."

He turned away but held tight to her hand. She buried her head down beside their hands and he moved his to cup the side of her face.

"Pen..." he whispered.

"Reggie..."

With an effort, he pulled back his hand and turned away again. "You need to go. Miss Pratt, please."

She rose with tears in her eyes and left, gently shutting the door behind her. She opened her own cabin and went inside, sitting silently on the bunk for a few moments, knowing that Reggie was separated only by a few boards from her, yet by a huge gulf of circumstances. Her hand hurt suddenly, and she glanced down to see that her nails had cut into her palm from forming a tight fist.

She unfurled them and slowly pulled off her dress, then struggled for a moment with her corset. Her breath came heavily once it was loosened and finally pulled off and she thought that there were some definite benefits to having a maid.

Shivering a little in the damp, cool evening air, she pulled her nightdress on and slipped between the covers. She shut her eyes tight against the tears that threatened and waited long into the night for sleep to claim her.

Chapter Twelve

Portsmouth loomed on the horizon, gray-black like the sky above it. Penelope worked her way along the forepeak, her good boots slipping a little on the slick wood. She paused, wondering if she should go any farther, when there was a sound above her.

“Miss Pratt, I do not recommend you go any farther,” Captain Coulter called down from the forecastle.

She looked up as she clung to the rope that formed the railing. Sighing, she took one last glance from her vantage point and began to work her way back to the main deck.

Captain Coulter trotted down the steps of the forecastle and met her. “We will be coming into Portsmouth in a short while. Will you need help getting to the post?”

She sighed, letting her hands drop expressively. “I suppose so. I have no idea how to even go about it.”

Finely-crafted eyebrows up, he offered her his arm as they strolled the length of the deck. “I shall be happy to assist you,” he said. “There is an excellent ostler who runs a cab service in Portsmouth. He will be able to take you to the carriage post station.”

She smiled up at him, noting Lady Loughton’s grim visage fixed upon them. The lady had recovered from her initial indisposition and had made sure that Penelope was unable to speak with Reggie more than once or twice. Now, she disappeared down the stairs, and Penelope suspected it was to tell him of her walk with the captain.

Letting go of Captain Coulter’s arm, she followed to see if she could intervene before any damage was done. A thought slowed her feet—what damage *could* be done? She was not of a lofty enough heritage to be acceptable to his family, and he had as good as told her to go. Resolve, however, hardened in her and she continued on. She had vowed to keep trying.

She saw Lady Loughton exiting Reggie’s room with a triumphant expression upon her face. She brushed past Penelope and went to her cabin, shutting the door securely. Penelope knocked gently on Reggie’s door and opened it.

“That is Penelope, by her step.”

“Yes, it is I.”

“Mother was here trying to spread vitriol as usual. I told her you may walk with any man you choose. Though, I don’t need to tell you I am jealous.” His mouth was set in a grim line and she kneeled beside him.

“Reggie, I think you know there is no one else for me.”

He shifted slightly. “Careful, my dear. That sounds like a declaration.”

She glanced down and fiddled with the end of her ribbon sash for a moment before lifting her face to his. “You seem more comfortable now. Have you taken off your eye bandages to see how well you can see now?”

He nodded. “I lift them up from time to time. It may be my imagination, but I think it is a little better.”

“That is excellent news! When do you think you may leave them off completely?”

“I don’t know. I plan to leave them on until a doctor tells me they are safe to remove.”

“That is sound. I am only sorry I won’t be there to see it.”

“As am I. Must you really return to London?”

“I think I must. Father will want to yell at me and go on about how I have ruined my reputation. I don’t want to deny him that pleasure.”

“You sound rather blasé about it.”

“No. It is only that I know him so well. He will howl at me for a day, and then all will be well. Perhaps then I can request to return to Lytchley.”

He reached out for her hand and she gave it to him. A clatter two doors down indicated Lady Loughton’s imminent return and Penelope stood.

Taking her hand back, she whispered, “I will talk to you later.”

“Miss Pratt! I believe I have warned you about tiring out my son.”

“Yes, ma’am, I was just leaving.”

She went to her cabin and made sure all her belongings were packed neatly into her trunk. She fished out the money she had hidden in its depths and slipped it back into her reticule after counting it. Biting her lip, she estimated the cost of getting home. There should be just enough, assuming nothing untoward happened.

She went in search of Mrs. Ainsworth and found her knitting happily on a bench on the deck. One of the older sailors stood nearby chatting with her. The lappets of her cap fluttered as she gave a coy toss of her head and Penelope smiled to herself.

“Oh, go on with you! I’m sure it’s nothing like,” Mrs. Ainsworth was saying.

“Nay, lass—y’ don’ mind if I call y’ tha’ I ‘ope.”

“Lass indeed—at my age.”

“Mrs. Ainsworth, we should get our things ready. Captain says we are coming into Portsmouth soon.”

The old sailor limped off and Mrs. Ainsworth stuffed the wool and the

scarf she was knitting into her voluminous workbag. Her round, placid face was lined with worry as she raised it. "Oh dear, I do hate travelling post. I've become quite spoiled with the carriage."

"Yes, me too. However, we will just have to make do and endure it. We'll be home soon enough."

The ship sailed gently into Portsmouth and Lord Loughton disembarked to find his family a carriage for hire. Penelope waited while Captain Coulter's man ran to the ostler on her behalf. Soon, an old cart arrived, and Penelope and Mrs. Ainsworth were called to the dock.

A pair of sailors carried their trunks down and helped settle them on the cart. Then the two women were helped up. Penelope cast a longing glance up at the ship, wishing she could see through into Reggie's cabin to bid him goodbye.

With a lurch, the cart started, and they were off, just as a carriage pulled up behind them and Lord Loughton got out. Penelope turned to face forward and watched as the closely packed buildings passed by.

The cart stopped half-a-mile along the road, and they got down, waited for their trunks to be unloaded, and looked around for a post office. She spied what appeared like one and went over, knocking on the shuttered window.

The shutters swung open, and an extremely short man leaned out over a desk to say, "What?"

"My companion and I need to go to London."

"Post isn't due for hours."

"We'll wait."

He pulled a piece of paper toward him and asked for their names, then wrote them down and quoted a price. Penelope pulled the notes from her reticule and passed them over. He attached the paper to a clipboard and shut the window.

Penelope wandered back toward the low bench where Mrs. Ainsworth sat. "Ma'am, are you hungry?"

"Oh, yes. Famished, I am. Long past time for tea."

"Well, we have a few hours to wait. Perhaps you would like to go get something while I wait with the trunks."

Mrs. Ainsworth ambled off toward a pub, leaving Penelope to watch people going to and fro. Soon enough, the carriage she had seen pull up to the ship came by and rolled down the road. Her eyes followed it, knowing that Reggie and his family must surely be inside. She sighed a little, hoping the journey would not be too much for him.

In good time, Mrs. Ainsworth returned and brought Penelope something to eat as well. Hours passed, and the rumbling and clatter of the approaching coach echoed along the street toward them.

Penelope eyes widened as the enormous coach came to a stop before them. Four stout horses pulled it. People descended from it and the driver went to the office, disappearing within for several minutes before coming out

with a piece of paper. He frowned as he looked at it and called out Penelope and Mrs. Ainsworth's names.

Their trunks were loaded onto the coach and they were hustled inside it. A strong odor of passed gas met them and Penelope made to back up but was pushed forward by Mrs. Ainsworth's bulk.

She fished a handkerchief out of her reticule as Mrs. Ainsworth said, "Oh...dear. Erumphf," and she held a large handkerchief up as well.

They settled on the seat, and after a moment another figure stepped up the stair and sat down opposite them. The door was shut, and they heard the driver climb back onto his own seat and call out to the horses. The coach jolted forward, and they were off.

Penelope stared out the window as they moved along, slowly at first but with gathering speed as they left the environs of Portsmouth and entered more open country. Soon enough, the motion of the carriage lulled her, and she leaned back and closed her eyes.

She awoke with a start to find the coach had stopped. Darkness covered the windows, while lanterns outside lit up the figures of men and women getting onto the coach and moving around it. She found herself scrunched up against the side with Mrs. Ainsworth as people pressed in. The smell of stale bodies and dirt filtered through the interior when the door was shut, locking them in with the sounds and smells of several strangers.

Penelope found it uncomfortable now, and all hope of sleep was lost as one of the women who had gotten on appeared to be in a long-standing argument with the gentleman seated across from her.

"Cyril, I've told you once, I've told you a hunnerd times that girl is no good for you."

Cyril rolled his eyes and leaned back against the seat—a difficult feat considering the large man to his right. "Aunt Imogene, let it go."

"You need to listen to me. I know that girl is seeing men on the side and she is leading you down the garden path." Cyril's eyes closed and Aunt Imogene huffed and leaned back, partially on Mrs. Ainsworth. "And that's another thing; yer father would never approve of that girl, you can bet yer buttons on that."

Penelope sighed to herself. It seemed as if the world insisted on pressing the tender spot on her heart. Whoever this girl was, she was in the same situation of loving someone considered too good for her.

A long, uncomfortable ride later, the coach pulled up to the stop in London and Penelope gladly stepped down. Their trunks were lowered and placed on the side of the road while Penelope tried to hail a cab. They would be placed under lock and key in the nearby office for the servant to come claim them after they reached home.

Road weary and stiff from the long ride, they arrived at their home and were barely up the front steps when the door burst open, and the maid screamed a little and ushered them in.

“Mr. Pratt! She’s here! And Mrs. Ainsworth as well!”

Penelope braced herself and stood tall as her father shot out from his room and walked swiftly down the hall. He looked her up and down, and then leaned forward and threw his arms about her. Eyes wide, she embraced him back.

When he finally pulled back, his eyes were wet, and he shook his head. “Don’t ever do that again,” he said rather hoarsely.

“No, sir.”

“Are you well?”

“Yes, sir. Just tired. We rode post from Portsmouth.”

He simply nodded and asked, “Where are your things? Oh yes, at the coach stop.” He called to a servant and sent them off to retrieve the trunks. Then, “Off to bed. I’m sure you could both use hot baths and an early night. I’ll have supper sent up to your rooms.”

Penelope sank gratefully into the hot bath her maid prepared for her. She soaked long after the water had cooled, and only stood to dry off when her fingers wrinkled from the water. Her nightdress felt heavenly, as did the linen sheets when she pushed her legs under the covers. Supper came and she forced herself to stay awake long enough to eat.

By the time the maid carried the tray away, she was fast asleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Reggie awakened to another dark morning. Dr. Welles had been in and determined his eyes needed to stay covered, though his other wounds were being left open. He rose anyway and let Pitt, his valet, dress him. He then refused any help in getting to the chaise in his room, though it required every ounce of strength he had.

A maid brought a breakfast tray in, and Reggie sipped his tea and ate his toast and eggs. It was too difficult to find the spoon and the marmalade, so he ate the toast dry, unwilling to ask another for help with something so small.

Breakfast over, he leaned back and sighed. He needed to gain strength, but sitting on a chaise would not accomplish that.

“Pitt!”

Steps resounded from outside in the hall and then, “Sir!”

“Can you find Father’s man and ask for the stick he uses when his leg is gouty?”

“Certainly, sir.” Pitt’s retreating footsteps conveyed he’d left for his errand.

Light tapping steps indicated the maid coming to take the tray away. His face and hands warmed from the sunshine shining in through the window. The clock downstairs struck the hour and Pitt returned. The smooth surface of his father’s cane was pressed into his hand and he rose, balancing as he did so.

Slowly, he stepped around the room, protecting his injured side as he did so. When he had gotten used to it, he said, “Pitt, guide me to the stairs. I want to try and go down.”

“Sir, perhaps we should ask your mother.”

“I am perfectly sound. Just point me in the direction.”

Pitt took his free arm and led him out of the room and toward the stairs. Leaning heavily on the bannister, Reggie edged slowly down, step-by-step. Half-way, he paused a moment to rest, then continued along.

When he was nearly down, the sound of familiar heels upon the floor echoed and he cringed as his mother cried aloud. “Reggie! You need to get back to bed this instant!”

“Mother, I am perfectly well...”

“I have seen your wounds—you are not perfectly well. You are still

healing.”

“I am well enough. I can’t lie about any further. I need to get up and be about.”

“Well, sit down at once.”

He allowed Pitt to lead him to a chair, for he was about done for as it was. He sat, feeling a momentary satisfaction. Dr. Welles was announced, and he turned his head expectantly.

“I would not have recommended such activity this soon,” came the doctor’s smooth voice.

“I had to get out of the room. I have been in there over a week now since we returned.”

“I understand but let me inspect your wounds to ensure they are intact.” Reggie allowed his jacket to be removed and his shirt opened up to reveal his shoulder. “Mmm. Well, no harm done. The wound in the shoulder is closed. Your side...hmmm, bleeding slightly. I’ll just slap a plaster on and see how it does. Now, let’s examine your eyes.”

He cut through the bandage and Reggie opened his eyes. Blurred colors and shapes distorted in the distance. He blinked and his vision cleared somewhat, but he could barely make out Dr. Welles’s face, and he was standing right before him.

“It is a little better, I think.”

“There seems to be some scarring, and I am no expert. However, I know a man in London, a Dr. Hartenger. I would recommend going to see him.”

“Oh, yes, anything to help my poor boy,” Lady Loughton cried.

“We can stay with Henrietta while in town,” Reggie said.

“Hartenger is on Harley Street, in Marylebone. I’ll leave these drops for you to put in your eyes in the meantime but do consult with him soon if you can.”

“We will go directly to London and see this man.”

“We will do what?” Lord Loughton’s heavy step echoed in the room.

“Well, I will leave you to it,” Dr. Welles said. Bottles clinked and instruments rattled as he packed up his bag. He patted the new bandage around Reggie’s eyes. “I still think you need to keep them covered but Hartenger may say differently.”

A thrill of hope went through Reggie. His mother’s skirts swished, and her heels clicked as she rushed about calling servants and setting them to prepare for the trip. Then quiet muttering ensued as she sat at her writing desk and wrote out letters to send at once to London and to cancel immediate plans in Lytchley.

He rose, leaning on his father’s cane and making his way by memory to the stairs. Once there, he slowly worked his way back upstairs to his room and lay heavily down on his bed. Pitt moved about the room, pulling clothes from the wardrobe and drawers, and transferring them to the trunks. Reggie could hear his mother in her rooms, giving commands in her brusque voice and

chastising hapless maids who moved slowly or uncertainly.

“Pitt, close the door, would you?”

His head began to ache, and he stared through the bandage, willing himself to see. He closed his eyes and brought Penelope’s image before him, smiling as he did so. Going to London meant the possibility of being near her, and a surge of life flowed through him at the thought.

He dozed, only to be awakened by the clink of the tray being set down on the side table and the smell of warm scones. The maid hovered in case he needed anything, and he said, “If you could put jam and butter on my scones, I would appreciate it.”

It was ridiculous having to ask like a child, but better that than the mess he would have made otherwise. He was tired of dry toast and scones. The taste, once he bit into them, was certainly worth the slight dash to his pride.

By the next morning, the trunks were loaded, and they were seated in the carriage. He dreaded the long journey in company of his parents, most especially his mother, but there was nothing else he could do. At least with his eyes bandaged, he could pretend to be asleep.

In his mind, he replayed every conversation with Penelope and had a fair idea of her feelings. His own were unchanged, and as he listened to his mother prattle on about available girls, the question lying unsaid amongst them was whether or not anyone would have him without his eyesight.

Perhaps, he thought, they wouldn’t object to Penelope if he was partially blind.

But then, he would. He could not tie her to a man unable to do all the things he thought he should have been able to do. Nothing firm came to his mind just at the moment, but surely a girl would not truly want a blind man—would she?

The journey took two days, and as they drove into London, the sun beat down and the morning haze faded. The inside of the carriage heated up, and the windows were opened to provide some relief. By the time the carriage pulled up in front of Lincoln House, they were all ready to get out and away from each other.

Henrietta and George met them at the door. Lady Loughton bustled inside, leading Reggie rather heavy-handedly.

“Mother, please—I am not an infant.”

“Oh, Reggie, but I worry about you so.”

“Stop it, please. Just let me walk.”

Henrietta managed to take his arm from his mother and led him to the settee where he sat down gratefully.

“Tea?”

“Yes, please. And something to eat!”

Henrietta chuckled and rang the bell, then gave the orders in her expressive voice once the maid arrived. Reggie heard her settled next to him on the settee.

She cleared her voice and said to her family who were all seated in the parlor by this time, "I understand you were all in Portugal together, and that my particular friend Penelope was there."

"Little minx had run away from her father and showed up with her nanny in tow."

"I think Mrs. Ainsworth is her chaperone, not her nanny," Reggie said.

"She was sorely lacking in her responsibilities. The girl should never have been allowed to travel like that. She had no business being there."

"I appreciated her care, Mother, and I would appreciate you leaving her out of it."

Lady Loughton humphed and Reggie sensed her mouth pinching shut.

Henrietta said, "Penelope seems unharmed by her adventure. We went to Vauxhall just the other evening for the entertainments. She seemed quite spirited."

"I understand your other friend is back in Lytchley now," Lord Loughton said.

"Yes, these past few days. The three of us were able to get together for a bit of shopping and tea before she went. Penelope and I had such fun buying things for the baby."

"Have they arranged for a nurse?" Lady Loughton asked.

"Well, Eliza rather wants to do as much as possible herself. She did mention getting a governess in a few years."

"What! No nurse! Outrageous!"

"Not really, Mother. Just a different way to approach it," Henrietta said calmly.

"Nonsense. Well-bred children are raised with a nurse. This is all nonsense, doing the job oneself. Leave it to the servants who know what they are doing."

"Well, I can understand not wanting to be parted from one's child," George said hesitantly.

"Nothing of the sort. There will be far too much to do to be constantly saddled with a baby. Running an estate takes work." Lady Loughton's corset creaked from her rapid breathing.

All were silent, thinking their own thoughts, but refraining from expressing them.

Henrietta cleared her throat a little and asked, "How was your journey back from Portugal?"

Lord Loughton harrumphed and said, "Quite, er, quite. You know. Began and ended just as one would expect. Ship was well managed—excellent captain. Fed us from his own table, quite civilized."

"And you, Reggie. How are you feeling?"

Reggie turned toward her, forced to estimate her location from her voice. "Much better. Stronger every day. Just need to get my eyes taken care of."

"We are hopeful of this new doctor. He has performed some miracles,"

Lady Loughton said.

“When will you see him?”

“In two days’ time. Tuesday.”

“Ah, yes. We are having a small supper party the next evening. You all are, of course, invited,” George said.

“Who will be there?” Lady Loughton demanded.

“My mother, her husband, and a niece of his. Miss Pratt will also be there.”

Lady Loughton’s expression became even more forbidding. “I was unaware she was still in London.”

“She is returning to Lytchley in a week or two’s time.”

“I will be happy to see her again. I have not seen her since we disembarked from the ship,” Reggie said.

“There has been no occasion to see her.”

“Yes, I understand she returned to London by Post,” Henrietta said a little coldly.

Lady Loughton sniffed. “Well, how else was she to get home? She rather put herself in that position.”

“I imagine it was an uncomfortable journey,” Henrietta said with a glance at her mother.

“I wouldn’t know. I have never had an occasion to travel post.”

The conversation lagged for a moment, then George asked Reggie, “What are your plans now? Do you return to your regiment?”

“Not like this. If my sight should improve enough, then perhaps. But really...I don’t know.”

“He needn’t do anything. He can help his father run the estate.”

Reggie’s head tipped backwards as though in frustration, but he said nothing.

Lord Loughton harrumphed. “Glad to have the help.”

Reggie’s fingers gripped the armrest and he struggled within himself. Suddenly, he knew what he wanted. A place far from his parents, with Penelope at his side. He closed his eyes and sighed silently to himself. He had no way to make it happen.

He reached for another little cake and Henrietta quickly picked it up and put it on his plate. Then, she set his teacup in his other hand for him. He resisted the desire to dash the cup to the floor, and instead drank carefully from it before setting it down with a rattle on the tray. He stabbed at the cake with his fork rather vehemently.

“Reggie, dear, do be careful...” His mother began.

“Dash it all—I am not a child! I don’t need cossetting.”

“Reggie!” Henrietta’s voice cut through the voices that had begun to rise. “You must allow us to help you. Tell us what we can do.”

His shoulders tensed and strained at the seams of his jacket for a moment before he relaxed and let loose a long sigh. “Sorry, Hen. You are being dashed

patient with me. I just hate that you need to be patient. I hate that I am like this."

"We know, Reg. And we all feel helpless. But we want to help—we need to help. You just need to let us, but also keep us informed when you are ready and able to do things on your own."

He nodded, reaching out a hand toward her. She took it and squeezed.

"Thanks, Hen. I will try to do better."

She became brisk. "Well then, let me show you to your room so you can rest before getting ready for dinner." She rose and took Reggie's arm, leading him slowly up the stairs to his room on the right. "Your man—Pitt, I believe—has already been here and unpacked your things. Shall I call him to help you dress?"

"Not yet—there is some time, I think. I will lie down and let the jangling of the carriage fade away."

She reached up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "You do that, brother. Shall I write to Penelope that you are here?"

"If you are writing her, you might tell her I am here."

He could almost hear her smile as she patted his arm and slipped away.

He closed the door and went cautiously in the direction the bed should be and lay down. Reaching up, he lifted the edge of the bandage and let his eyes adjust to the influx of light from the candles around him. He thought he could make out Pitt's form bustling about, unpacking his trunk. He was fairly certain that he was wearing a pink waistcoat and the thought caused him to grin. Hope flushed warmly through him as he dropped the edge of the bandage back into place.

Two nights sped by, and Tuesday arrived. He stepped out into the carriage accompanied by his parents while his heart pattered rapidly in his chest. His mother prattled nervously, while he could hear his father absently patting her hand from time to time. The carriage pulled up before the doctor's surgery and the footman let down the step with a clank for them all to descend.

Reggie had found his ability to sense when things were near had become more acute and he was able to walk relatively unassisted into the sitting room. After a few moments, a young woman called him to follow her, and he was led into a room and bid to sit. He did not have to wait long.

"Ah, the Lieutenant Reginald Darrow?" came a rather deep voice.

"Yes, sir."

Reggie sat up, alert now as he heard the metal tink of a pair of scissors being picked up and felt the cold edge slide along the side of his face as the doctor slowly cut away the bandages covering his eyes.

"Saw a bit of action, I see." He traced his finger along a couple of the scars on Reggie's face. "These should fade in time. You won't know the difference."

"Got some others that probably won't."

“No, not everything fades away completely.” He pulled the bandages off and Reggie blinked in the light. “Good, you can see the light. Now, I am going to put an instrument on your eyes to force them to stay open. Then, I need to shine a light using this mirror. You will have to withstand your desire to turn away.”

“Yes, sir.”

There came a pinch on Reggie’s eyelids and then a bright light overpowered him, and he worked hard to hold still. The light moved and then receded, and the instrument was placed on his other eye and the same examination followed. Then the instrument was removed, and Reggie heard it settle back on the tray.

“Good news and bad, I’m afraid. The bad news is your eyes are terribly inflamed from the explosion. Debris appears to have scarred your corneas. We need to get the inflammation under control first. I will give you some eyedrops to put in several times a day, and you will need to wear these tinted spectacles until the inflammation has improved.”

“Will I be able to see again?”

“That will all depend on how deep the scars go. It may be that as the inflammation recedes, your sight improves. I suspect it will be so. We will hope for the best, at any rate.”

Something cold and heavy settled on his nose and upon his ears. He reached up to feel the spectacles being placed on his face. He could see the shape of the doctor and the light in the room suddenly changed to amber. The sensation of pressure behind his ears was strange, as was the weight of the spectacles on his nose.

“I must look ridiculous!”

“Not at all. And this will allow the air to circulate and calm the injured tissues around your eyes.”

Reggie reveled in the little sight that he had. Shapes and figures stood out now that the bandages were gone, and it was as though his brain understood what he was seeing more clearly. He stood and walked confidently around the room, until he bumped into a stool and laughed.

“Not quite there, I guess.”

“You will be. I expect more of your sight to return each day. We will just have to wait and see how much.”

Reggie held out his hand. “Thank you, Dr. Hartenger.”

“I want to see you in a week.”

Lady Loughton gasped when he walked into the room. “Oh, Reggie, you are better already!”

“He has a favorable outlook at present. Time will tell.” The doctor stepped out for a moment and returned with a stoppered vial. “As I said, three drops in each eye, several times per day.”

Reggie sat by the window, staring out and trying to discern the varied shapes speeding by as the carriage moved along. He thought it could be his

imagination, but things were already seeming clearer.

Perhaps there was reason to hope where Penelope was concerned.

Chapter Fourteen

Penelope sat at the piano. Her fingers glided over the keys and for a moment she was lost to the music. Her mind revolved around memories of Reggie—dancing with him, walking with him, seeing him lying before her wounded and in pain.

Suddenly, she realized it was quiet, and that she had stopped playing.

Shuffling the music together, she straightened it and rose from the piano bench. Sunlight streamed in through the drawn curtains, and she paused for a moment to gaze out at the busy street outside. The sounds of horses' hooves and carriages rumbling by echoed dully through the glass of the window. It was already warming up outside, and she wondered if Reggie would be going outside to soak in the rare sunshine.

Her father came briskly down the stairs and called for his hat. He glanced over at her and nodded. "Need to meet with the attorneys this morning. You will be all right, yes? No running off?"

"I'll be fine, Papa. I promise not to go anywhere. Well, unless Hen invites me for tea. Otherwise, I have no engagements."

"Good! Good. Until this afternoon, then."

He closed the door behind him just as a cab pulled up in front of the house. She watched him go and then sighed.

After a glance at the clock, she dashed to the writing desk and wrote a note, directing it and sealing it quickly before placing it with the rest of the post. Her gaze fell upon her dress and she trotted up the stairs to change it. After all, one could not be overprepared.

She heard the bell ring and suspected it was the post. While fastening some earrings, the maid knocked and brought her a letter with Henrietta's handwriting.

My Dear Pen!

Do come for tea—I beg you. You will have to endure Mother, although I am hoping to convince her to go shopping. But, however, I am desperate to see you, and tomorrow night is just too long. I will just send the carriage to get you at noon, so be ready. There, I am being an autocratic friend but really, if you knew my situation, you would do the same!

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Hen

Penelope read it over and smiled. She reviewed her appearance in the mirror. Hair, well groomed—really, Edith had done it extraordinarily well. Her dress was a white muslin with her pale, mint green spencer and her grandmother's peridot necklace and earrings. She frowned at her nose, but hoped that despite its unfortunate shape, she still managed to look quite well indeed.

By the time the Strathom carriage rolled to a stop in front of her house, she was ready with her shawl over her arm and her bonnet tied jauntily under her ear. She walked swiftly into the carriage and braced against the initial jolt when it started forward.

Henrietta was waiting for her and threw open the door as though in desperation when the carriage pulled up. Penelope stepped out and was immediately enfolded in an embrace.

"Oh, Pen, I am going to do some evil to my mother if she does not leave soon," Henrietta whispered hastily.

Penelope bit her lip and smiled. "My being here won't make her any easier to deal with."

"No, but the rest of us will have a pleasant distraction!"

They climbed the short walk and steps and were soon inside the house. Penelope untied her bonnet and handed it to the butler with her shawl. She glanced around and saw Reggie standing to one side. He wore a pair of amber-tinted spectacles that gave him a rather mysterious appearance. It was a moment before she realized he was staring at her.

"Reg...er, Mr. Darrow. You can see!"

He reached out for her hands and gripped them tightly. "Not exactly, but it is getting better by the day."

"Oh, do tell me about it! What has happened?"

He explained about the doctor and the prescribed treatment. "And so, over the past two days, things have improved. I can make out shapes—I can see you sitting there. Not well enough to recognize your face, unfortunately, but enough to know someone is there."

"But this is excellent news! How wonderful it must be to see light again and have the bandage off!"

"It is! Actually, as it is very fine today, I was hoping you would take a turn with me outside."

Taken slightly aback, Penelope said quietly, "Is that advised? I mean, permitted?"

"I think I can determine with whom I take a turn about the neighborhood."

"Well then, I would love to. I must just get my bonnet."

She turned, but Henrietta already had it for her, and she burst into laughter as she tied it on. Then she took Reggie's arm and together they left the house.

"Mrs. Ainsworth is well, I presume?" he said.

“Yes, very. She is visiting her nephew at the moment in Kent. You find me quite alone.”

“You have your father...”

“You know Father—he is always out and about. I am very glad your sister invited me over today.”

“Not as happy as I am.”

“May I ask—where is your mother?”

“Ah. She is on King’s Road, shopping and having tea with a friend. I do not expect her back before dinner.”

Penelope smiled and guided Reggie around a lamppost. “How long will you stay in London?”

“That is dependent upon the doctor and when he releases me from his care. I am totally committed to his treatment.”

“It seems to be working, and I am so glad for you.”

“And you, when do you return to Lytchley?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. Father keeps postponing it. I think he is afraid to have me out of his sight after...well, Portugal.”

He paused, and Penelope turned to look up at him. His eyes stared through her, but she did not doubt he was seeing her.

“Penelope, I never thanked you for coming to me in Aveiro. I know what it must have cost you to do so.”

“It is only what anyone might have done for a particular friend.”

“Am I then, a particular friend?”

“I think, Mr. Darrow, you know that you are.”

“Then, Miss Pratt...” He paused, and she waited with bated breath. Time ticked by, but then he simply dropped his head and added only, “Perhaps we should continue on.”

Penelope was struck dumb. That he had been about to declare himself, she had no doubt. But something had stopped him.

They completed their circuit in near silence.

Henrietta glanced from one to the other in perplexment when they entered the foyer of Lincoln House. Penelope could barely respond normally to the discussion and after a time, claimed a headache and the carriage was called.

Henrietta accompanied her to the carriage and whispered, “Did Reggie say something?”

Penelope paused, but hugged her friend and whispered, “He did not,” and hoped she would understand. Then she climbed into the carriage and once the door was closed and they moved along, she hung her head and cried.

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Henrietta stared after the carriage, then turned on her heel and went indoors. Reggie stood by the window, apparently waiting for her.

“Well?” she demanded.

“I did not speak.”

“I know that. Why? You love each other—that much is obvious.”

“And what of the expectations of me, Hen?”

“Expectations?”

“I am the son, the heir. I am already damaged as I am. I nearly walked into a pole and she had to rescue me. Hen, what kind of husband will I make? And what will Mother and Father make of her? They will hector her until she is mad.”

“They will become accustomed to it...”

“Like Mother is accustomed to George? Except, you do not live with them. He is not subjected to her constantly as Penelope would be.”

“You could get your own home.”

“Where? With what money? I am totally dependent upon Father and what he chooses to settle on me. Which might be nothing if he doesn’t approve of my choice.”

Henrietta was silent. She remembered her own struggles with her marriage. Reggie’s eyes were bright behind the glasses, and she laid a hand on his arm. “Is she truly lost to you, then?”

Reggie sighed. “I can’t accept that. I am at a crossroads, and I will not take the only route open to me right now.”

On the other side of Chelsea, the carriage came to a rather bumpy stop in front of Penelope’s home. She settled her wet handkerchief back inside her reticule, stepped out and went quickly up the short walk to her home. She pushed past Jerrod and ran upstairs to her room. Once there, she sat on the chaise beside the window and stared out for a time, her knees drawn up and encircled by her arms.

After the first burst of tears, understanding of a sort had dawned slowly upon her. She understood Reggie and had a fair idea of his struggles where she was concerned. But where did that leave her? She would be expected to marry one day—her father could not support her forever. She did not want to end up like Mrs. Ainsworth—shunted from relative to relative with no fixed home of her own.

She sighed into her arms and lifted her head. Anger suddenly flared inside her. She had made herself perfectly plain to him and the world by her actions. That he was unwilling to do the same said enough.

The maid came and knocked. “Miss, tea is ready. Where would you like it?”

“I’ll take it in the parlor, Edith.”

She rose and brushed her gown straight while unbuttoning her spencer and laying it on the chaise. Slipping off her best shoes, she pulled on a more comfortable pair and went downstairs.

Sitting with a buttered scone in hand, she stared at the empty fireplace and sighed once more. What was she to do, now? Reggie did not want her, or rather, thought he could not claim her. So, now what? Besides learn to live

with a broken heart?

She nibbled on her scone and sipped her sweetened tea. It filled her up on the inside in one way, but only highlighted how empty she felt. Life stretched long and lonely before her.

The bell rang and she glanced up as Jerrod came toward her. A letter lay on the salver addressed to her and she picked it up with a frown. Breaking the seal, she unfolded it to find a rather short note:

Miss Pratt,

Forgive the intrusion, but I find myself in London for a few days and thought I would send this note to see that you got home safely from Portsmouth. If you would be so good as to let me know of your safe return, I would appreciate it as I have not been comfortable since you left the care of my ship. My regards to Mrs. Ainsworth and your father.

Sincerely,

Captain Desmond Coulter

Penelope's frown deepened. Then she went to her writing desk and wrote two very different letters. One was to Henrietta, and the other was to Captain Coulter inviting him to Henrietta's supper party the following day.

When she had finished and seen them both posted, she went back to the parlor and sat at the instrument. She flexed her fingers and then started in with a complex piece. Music filled the house, executed perfectly and with force. As her fingers raced along the keys, her anger dissipated and calm spread through her once more. When she had finished the piece, she knew she was still angry with Reggie, but at least she did not feel it reverberating through her.

Taking a deep breath, she switched to an old Irish love song and played it expressively, the words ringing in her heart. She loved Reggie; nothing would change that. Ever. But she would not go down without a fight. If he would not speak on his own, she would give him something to speak about!

Chapter Fifteen

The night of Henrietta's supper party arrived, and Penelope rushed down the stairs in her silver gown. It was white underneath and had silver-embroidered organza over the top. Her sash was bronze, embroidered over with silver as well. Miss Saunders had done her well!

The bell rang and the butler announced Captain Coulter. She went to greet him, and he bent over her gloved hand very nicely. She smiled at him, though it did not penetrate her heart, and led him back out to the waiting carriage. Mrs. Ainsworth ambled along behind them, back from Kent that very day.

"Tell me again of your friends," he said.

"They are Mr. and Mrs. Strathom. She is the daughter of Lord and Lady Loughton and her brother is Reginald Darrow—the man who was injured in the war."

"Ah, yes. He is recuperating, I hope?"

"Quite. His eyesight is returning slowly."

"Well, that is excellent news."

"Imagine! Having one's eyesight taken from one..." Mrs. Ainsworth said.

The carriage stopped and they stepped out onto path leading to the front doors of Lincoln House. He held out his arm and she took it lightly. A shadow moved at the window and she wondered if Reggie had been waiting for her.

She introduced him to Henrietta and George, though he needed no introduction to the rest of the party. Lady Loughton snubbed him rather, but Lord Loughton was hearty in his welcome. Reggie was aloof, though he granted Coulter a nod of acknowledgement. Penelope saw it and smiled to herself.

"So, Captain, where are you back from?" George asked as he handed him a drink.

"Back again from Portugal and Ireland."

"That's an odd combination."

"It is, but not when you consider wool, and the Irish have plenty of that—and potatoes, which the Portuguese enjoy."

"And what do you take to Ireland from Portugal?"

“Wine and manufactured goods, primarily. People sometimes, as in your instance. We will sometimes take commissions from the army to deliver goods. Whatever needs doing on the seas, really.”

“Except fighting,” Reggie said.

“Exactly, though we have had to defend against brigands at times. The French do their best to disrupt English commerce. Luckily, we are too small an operation to attract much attention from privateers.”

“How has the war with America affected you?” Penelope asked.

“Not much, except to rile up the French. We don’t do many voyages across the Atlantic, though if we did, I am certain the effect would be much larger.”

Penelope glanced up and found Reggie’s eyes on her. She wondered to what degree his vision had improved but was too angry to ask aloud. Instead, she cut a sliver from her quail and placed it in her mouth.

After supper, the ladies withdrew to the parlor and were soon joined by the men.

George cleared his throat and said, “Since we have two excellent performers, perhaps they would grace us with some entertainment. Miss Pratt, may I prevail upon you to indulge us?”

Penelope smiled and rose. “Of course, Mr. Strathom.”

She went to the piano and sifted through some of the music there. Finding an old favorite, she opened it up and set her fingers free upon the ivory.

As she played, Henrietta joined her by singing, and the room swelled with their song. Penelope was too lost in her performance to see the eyes of both Reggie and Captain Coulter fixed upon her.

When their song was done, the room erupted in applause and Captain Coulter’s outlasted everyone else’s. Henrietta encouraged Penelope to play another, but this time sat down beside George with a glance toward her brother as though to see how he was taking Captain Coulter’s attentions.

Penelope finished at the piano and Henrietta took her place. Penelope was careful to choose a seat away from both Reggie and the captain. Her gaze automatically sought out Reggie’s, but his face remained turned steadfastly away.

Henrietta played another tune and Captain Coulter rose from his seat to move closer to Penelope. As Henrietta continued, he leaned over toward Penelope and said, “This is the sort of thing we miss on board a ship.”

She turned toward him slightly and whispered, “I never thought about that. Can you not have a piano?”

He shook his head. “There is nowhere to put it, and with all the movement I fear it would go out of tune too frequently.”

Henrietta suddenly struck an off chord, causing Penelope to wince and look her way. She found her friend’s gaze upon her and frowned, wondering why. Then she caught sight of the tension about Reggie’s jaw and wondered.

She paid attention from then on until the end of the song and joined the others in their appreciation.

Lord Loughton stepped over to speak to Captain Coulter and Henrietta pulled Penelope away for a moment.

“I’m sorry, that was clumsy of me,” she said.

“And uncharacteristic!”

“Well, I had to do something to distract you from Captain Coulter. I thought Reggie was going to challenge him then and there.”

“Reggie? Why should he care?”

Henrietta threw her a pitying look. “Really, Pen! Is this why you brought him?”

Penelope glanced back at the room. “I don’t know. But Hen, one day I will have to marry. Papa has said I must—there is no one to care for me if something happens to him. Besides, I don’t wish to be alone forever, just because the man I love doesn’t want me.”

“He loves you, Pen.”

“Well, not enough, Hen.”

They returned to the group and sat together on the settee. Penelope suspected that Henrietta positioned her there so she would be unlikely to speak further with Captain Coulter. Glancing over toward him she was amused to see Lady Loughton actually listening to him with the ghost of a smile on her face.

Reggie sat across from them, his face turned stubbornly toward the fire. Penelope longed to provoke him to words but held her tongue. She was far too angry to engage in a discussion with him present. She listened with half an ear to Henrietta’s polite discussion with her father over some political situation that Lord Loughton happened to have information on.

“I have it straight from General Whitcomb himself at my club—Wellesley’s troops have cleared Madrid of the French and the war is nearly won.”

“It is good to think Reggie’s actions have accomplished something toward that end,” Henrietta said.

“Indeed, it is. The Spanish have reason to thank your brother.”

Penelope let her gaze drift over to where Reggie sat. She desperately wanted to know what he was thinking, but the gulf between them was too wide, especially with Lady Loughton seated at the opposite end of the sofa. She dropped her head to study her hands lying neatly in her lap and stifled a sigh.

Henrietta jogged her lightly with her elbow and she looked up. Captain Coulter stood there with one hand out.

“I fear I must take my leave. Thank you for including me in your evening’s plans.”

She gave him her hand and said, “Oh, Captain. Thank you so much for coming. I hope we shall meet again.”

“May I have the pleasure of calling on you next time I am in London?”

Penelope’s glance shot to Reggie, whose jaw had suddenly hardened. Glancing back up at Captain Coulter, she said, “Of course. I should enjoy that.”

He smiled and bowed before leaving.

The door had barely closed behind him when Lady Loughton said, “Goodness, how late it is getting.”

Penelope rose, then, taking the hint. “Indeed, it is. I must be going, Papa will be wondering where I am. Mr. Strathom, would you be so kind as to call my carriage?”

Henrietta grasped Penelope’s hand as George went on his errand. Penelope tried to catch Reggie’s eye, but he remained resolutely turned away, staring once more into the fire. Her carriage arrived and she hugged Henrietta goodbye. Reggie turned from the fire long enough to stand and bow his goodbye, though he did not seem to trust himself to speak.

George escorted Penelope to her carriage and saw her safely inside. She pulled her shawl around her, grateful for its warmth against the cool evening air and the chill of Reggie’s farewell. The carriage rolled on over the cobbled streets and she let her head lie back against the seat. She had just publicly accepted the attentions of another man, and she had a moment to think on what she had done.

Real fear struck her. She knew so little about Captain Coulter, and at the same time could sense how angry Reggie must be with her. But then, what was she to do? She could not isolate herself because Reggie was unwilling to declare for her. While she understood many of his reasons, in the end it amounted to his unwillingness to stand up for her.

She stomped her foot and made an impatient sound at the thought of his pride. Pride of a man not wishing to inflict his limitations on a woman, and pride of family—not wanting to impose one such as her upon them.

The carriage pulled up to her home and the footman escorted her to the door where Jerrod, the butler, met her. He took her shawl and rang for Edith who met her at her bedroom door.

By the time she climbed into bed, tears were ready to spring once again, and she struggled to keep them at bay. In order to do so, she allowed herself to remember happier times with Reggie and Henrietta.

It almost worked.

Two days later, Henrietta was announced just as Penelope was getting ready to go for a walk.

“Hen!”

Henrietta embraced her, then handed her pelisse and bonnet to the butler. “Pen! My goodness, you are dressed to go out.”

“Oh, but I shan’t now that you are here. Come in!” She turned and called out to a passing maid, “Please have tea sent in when it’s ready.”

“Yes, miss.”

Penelope looked more closely at Henrietta, noting the deep circles under her eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I needed to get away for a while. Reggie went back to the doctor today, but Mama stayed home, and I desperately needed some time away from her."

Penelope bit her lip, her head on one side. "As bad as that? I should have thought that with the baby on the way, she'd be a comfort to you."

Henrietta shot her an incredulous glance. "I know you are not that obtuse, Pen. My mother has many qualities, but maternal comfort is not one of them. Papa can't hear mention of my "condition" without blustering and going red, and Mama simply lifts her chin and states again that it is not something to be spoken of. It's as though I am dying of some curse that can't be mentioned."

"And, how are you?"

"Well enough, I suppose. A little tired now and then, though that may just be the pressure of having my family living in my house. After all, I am still getting used to being married."

"That's true. A lot has happened very suddenly for you."

"And you." Henrietta cast a knowing expression at Penelope.

"Yes, in some ways. All that is over now."

"And Captain Coulter?"

Penelope lifted her hands and let them fall. "He is at sea again, thank goodness."

"Really? It seemed as though you were encouraging him."

"Yes, I don't know. I don't understand why I said what I did. But if Reggie won't have me, then..."

"My dear, surely you don't think that is the case."

"But it is, Hen. It is. He could have simply spoken and had me, but he chose not to."

"I won't defend him, except to say he is conflicted about many things at the moment."

"Yes, and I feel for him. But, Hen, you chose George."

"Finally, and after much pain where my family is concerned."

"Yes, I forget you had a rough time of it."

"But anyway, I have kept you from your exercise. Do tell me if you would rather continue on your walk and I will happily join you."

Penelope looked at her friend, noting the pallor and slightly thinner face. "No, Hen. You seem tired, if I may say so as a friend."

"You may, and I am. As I said, I am ready for my family to return to Lytchley. Speaking of which, when do you return?"

"I don't know. Father has postponed it again. I am almost ready to travel post."

"Now I am sure you are not serious. I was so angry with my family for leaving you to travel that way."

"I took no offense. Reggie was in a bad way, and I couldn't say what I would have done in their shoes."

Their tea had come in while they were talking, and Penelope handed Henrietta a cup. "Our tea has gone cold. Shall I order another pot...?"

Henrietta stopped her. "In this heat, warm tea is fine. Besides, it's our fault for talking as we did."

In companionable silence, they nibbled the freshly made biscuits and drank their tepid tea.

After a few moments, Penelope said softly, "How is Reggie, truly?"

Henrietta put down her cup. "He is wretched, Pen. I really thought he would do Captain Coulter a harm."

Penelope blew out an impatient breath. "He knows he needn't be so wretched. He need only speak."

"What shall you do?"

"There is little enough that I can do. I won't be seen by your family to be a husband-chaser. My father expects me to marry, and so I must accept the attentions of eligible men. Captain Coulter is eminently eligible to one such as Father."

"He did seem the perfect gentleman. Just rough enough to be interesting." Henrietta smiled.

Penelope tried to smile but could not. Instead, she said simply, "He is a good, honorable man and I admire him. But, after all, he is not Reggie."

"And yet you accept his attentions?"

Penelope sighed. "I don't know what I am to do. I can hope he will tire of me and move on, and yet if I have to marry—why not a sea captain?"

"Oh, Pen... I would not have you marry someone you do not love."

"No, nor would I. But that may be my lot in life."

After a time, Henrietta glanced at the clock and sighed. "I have to be going, my dear Pen. We must get together again before you leave. Do let me know when you have that fixed."

Penelope rose and hugged her friend. "I will, Hen. Take care of your brother for me."

"Indeed, I will."

She collected her shawl and bonnet, and her carriage was called. As she walked down the short path she turned and waved at Penelope, then climbed elegantly into the carriage and was gone.

Turning from the door, Penelope wandered to the pianoforte in the parlor and sat down. Her fingers picked out a doleful melody, and she slowly warmed to the tune. The music swelled throughout the house, before dimming as she brought it to a quiet close. Edith came into the room with a letter, and she accepted it with a frown. Her eyes flew open as she saw the direction—it was from Captain Coulter.

My dear Miss Pratt,

We are stopped in Southampton, picking up some horses and a couple of

crew members. The horses are bound for Ireland and are accompanied by a host of handlers as they are apparently expensively cherished somethings, which I do not quite understand. But then, I do not need to as my job is simply to take them to Dublin and see them safely transferred.

I hope I do not bore you with these details. I find myself at a loose end just now and thought of you. I enjoyed my time with you excessively, and I hope to repeat the experience again when next I am in England. Until that time, I pray you think of me fondly,

Yours ever,

Captain Desmond Coulter

The Tempest

Penelope read it and folded it slowly, thinking. As she was reading it again, her father entered from the front and came to kiss her on her forehead.

His gaze fell upon her letter and he said, "What have we here? Captain Coulter, eh? Am I to have a daughter at sea?"

She smiled wanly at his teasing. "Hardly, Papa. It is simply a letter."

"Well, we shall have you married off before your next birthday, see if we don't."

"Papa?"

"Yes, m'dear."

"Would it be terrible if I didn't marry?"

"Cold feet, eh?"

"I just wondered how you would feel if I didn't marry."

His gaze sharpened on her. "Are you serious, Penelope? A woman's duty is to marry..."

"Yes, Papa. But I had hoped to marry for love."

"Oh, er...that's all well and good, m' dear. But a marriage to a man who can take good care of you, respect you, and all that. Can't hope for much more, can we?"

"No, sir. I suppose not."

He patted her awkwardly on the shoulder and hurried off toward his room. She watched him go with tears in her eyes but swallowed them and took a deep breath. She picked up Captain Coulter's letter and carried it upstairs to her room, adding it to his other letter. A glance at the fireplace showed that no fire was going, and she simply placed them in the drawer of her nightstand instead.

Chapter Sixteen

Morning light spilled in through the open curtains and illuminated Reggie's closed eyes. He slowly opened them, sitting up and reaching for the eye drops to place in them. He frowned suddenly, for he could see the dropper bottle.

It was not crystal clear, but he could see it. Blurred though his vision still was, he could see the edge of the nightstand, the bottle sitting on the silver tray with the tinted glasses. It was the clearest he had been able to see since the battle.

Joy surged within him, as did a desperate need to tell Penelope. Until he remembered the cloud placed between them by his actions.

He rose and rang for his valet to help him dress. With his sight returning, he needed to write Colonel Hackett to see whether or not he should report back to his company. Dressing quickly, he pulled on his spectacles and trotted down the stairs to the writing desk in George's study. He reveled in the feeling of being able to move around with confidence.

After penning a rather scrappy-looking note to his commanding officer, he sealed it and placed it in the foyer with the other letters to go with the post. Then he walked to the front door, opened it, and stepped out into the sunshine.

Freedom assailed him, ringing through him like a bell. Although still muddled, he could see the end of the walk, the gate, the road beyond and the pedestrians, horses, and carriages moving along.

He turned to the right and peered around as he went. Other houses stood brooding over the road; cabs and hansom clattered by. He traversed the block, finally ending back at Lincoln House, where he could make out a figure at the window. Though it was too blurred to identify, he was fairly certain it was Henrietta.

Sure enough, the door burst open, and she came out toward him. "Reg! Where have you been! We were so worried!"

He looked her in the eyes and smiled. Caught off guard, her eyes flew open, and she threw her arms around his neck. "You can see—I mean, really see!"

He picked her up and swung her around. She broke away and ran into the house while he chased after her, only to be caught by their mother, staring

wide-eyed at them.

“What on earth is going on?”

“Oh, Mama. It is excellent news. Reggie can see—really see!”

She cried out, holding her hands toward him. “My boy! It is as I always said it would be—a miracle!”

“Yes, well, this means I will have to rejoin my regiment.”

“But surely, surely you have done your duty.”

“The only other option is that I resign my commission.”

“Then resign it! I could not endure it if you were wounded again.”

“But, Mother. If others are fighting, then so must I.”

“I forbid it!”

Reggie looked at her with a sad expression. “You can’t, actually. I have already written to Colonel Hackett and informed him of my improvement.”

“Dr. Hartenger must have a say.”

“I saw him but two days ago—he said I might resume normal activities as my eyesight allowed.”

Lady Loughton fairly shook with frustration and turned on her heel, stalking from the room.

Henrietta laid a hand on Reggie’s arm and he covered it with his own. “I still can’t read properly, so they may not want me. Don’t know how I would do in battle.”

“Surely you can’t want to go back to that.”

He glanced away. “What I want, and what I can do, are two completely different things. At the moment, I have one decision that is completely mine. And so, I will make it.”

She laid her head on his shoulder and nodded.

“You’ll soon be too busy to worry about me.”

“That will never happen.”

His arm found her shoulder and he gave her a slight hug. “Well, sister, tell me where a cavalry man can get a decent breakfast. I seem to have missed mine.”

“Breakfast has been put up, but I will get you a plate of eggs and toast.”

He grinned. “You make a very nice hostess, Hen.”

She pushed him away and rose to go make the necessary arrangements. He sat on the sofa, tipping his head back to stare up at the intricately moulded ceiling. He tried to remove the spectacles, but the light strained his eyes too much and he quickly replaced them. His father had left the paper folded up on the table next to the sofa, so he lifted it and was easily able to make out the name of the paper. The rest of the writing was far too small for him, however.

Silence filtered over him, like dust settling inexorably down. The only sound was a maid sweeping off the steps out front. Penelope pressed forward in his mind and he closed his eyes against the thought. It was all he could do not to write to her and tell her his news.

“Reggie? Here. A breakfast fit for a warrior.” Henrietta set the tray down

beside him and he tucked into the eggs.

“Not much of a warrior,” he said between bites. “Lost my horse in the first battle. I’ll need another somehow.”

“You have that rather leggy hunter...”

“Not suitable at all. I’ll need a heavier horse for this. Something of an all-rounder.”

“Perhaps you can find one in London.”

“Yes, perhaps. At least it would be used to traffic and noise. I’ll think on it.” He went silent and finished his toast as Henrietta watched. Downing the last of the tea, he set the cup on its saucer and looked at his sister. “We’re wearing on you.”

She tossed her head a little as though to deny it, then sighed. “A little. I feel for you and Penelope, Father is getting restless, and Mama has taken to ‘helping’ me run my household.”

“The burdens of a loving heart.”

“Not feeling so loving just now. Rather tired, actually.”

“And having a baby on top of it all.”

“Yes, there is that.”

“I noticed that George is gone a lot.”

“Yes, he finds it easier to conduct his business elsewhere and leave Mama to scowl at his memory.”

Reggie was suddenly serious. “I could not put Penelope through that, Hen.”

“I think it should be her decision.”

He shook his head. “I shall make a living as a soldier, independently, and then perhaps I can have her.”

“How long will that take?”

He shrugged. “I have most of my pay so far, but houses are damned expensive. I talked to George about costs...it will be a while before I can afford it all.”

“Perhaps Father...”

“If Father gets involved, Mother gets involved. She would be choosing and decorating a place before I knew it and hiring servants as well.”

“That is true...”

“I’m going to have some independence. Something of my own. That way, no one can say anything to me about it. If I choose to marry Penelope, then so be it.”

“How long might that take?”

He shrugged again, scowling. “I don’t know... I only hope she waits.”

“There is that captain...” But the expression on Reggie’s face caused her to break off. She sighed, then picked up the tray and carried it off.

Lord Loughton took news of Reggie’s improved eyesight as evidence that his presence was no longer needed in London. As such, the Loughtons began to make plans to return to Yorkshire. Lady Loughton was clearly torn,

but in the end her husband prevailed. Reggie was to stay behind until he heard from his colonel. Within days, they were gone.

When the carriage carrying her parents pulled away, Henrietta sat down with an audible sigh.

Reggie grinned in her direction. "Relieved, sister?"

"Indeed, yes. So much so, I think I will go write a letter and then lie down." Her hand fluttered indecisively over her stomach for a moment. "I am feeling a bit disordered today."

George watched her go with a tender look on his face. "One feels so helpless..."

Reggie simply nodded, feeling at a loss.

George smiled briefly in Reggie's direction. "It will be easier on her now that your parents have returned home."

"It will be easier on all of us," Reggie said.

George chuckled. "Yes, I cannot deny that for myself." He looked piercingly at Reggie, adding, "You seem uncommonly...alive this morning, er, afternoon."

"I am taking control of my life again. My eyesight is returning, and I will probably soon be rejoining my regiment."

"Just like that? What about...Penelope?"

"I must make a life of my own before I can ask anyone to join me."

George nodded. "I can respect that. Does she know you do this for her?"

Reggie shook his head. "Better for her that she be unencumbered. For now."

George sighed and bit his lip, but said nothing.

Within a week, Reggie had his answer. Colonel Hackett would be most appreciative of having him back. There was a spare horse for him, and so there was little for Reggie to do except pack his things and head off to rejoin the Yorkshire 3rd Cavalry in Portugal.

Just as he was leaving, he stopped to write a letter, then at the last minute he changed his mind. There was nothing further to say.

Chapter Seventeen

The night sky exploded with fireworks and the band played louder to compensate for the noise. Aloysius clapped and hooted with delight, shaking Penelope as she stood beside him. She laughed and clapped, and the lights glinted in her shining eyes as she watched her father's excitement. And yet, it failed to reach very far into her. Another burst of fireworks lacerated the night, and she jumped a little, then sighed.

A cart came around selling iced cakes and her father bought them each one, handing her the paper-wrapped cake and taking a large bite out of his own. She started to unwrap hers, then sealed the paper back and glanced down to see a little girl staring at her piece of cake. With a little smile, she held it out to the girl. She took it, beaming.

"Well, that's it. Let's get going so that we won't get stuck in the crush of carriages."

Aloysius Pratt shooed his daughter ahead of him, through the crowd. People walked slowly along the lanes of the garden, watching the festivities as they wound down.

Penelope pulled her shawl around her shoulders as they eased out of the crowd. The noticeably cooler air moved around her—no longer warmed by all the bodies massed together. Aloysius pulled out his watch to check the time in the light of a lantern and hurried her along. Her feet moved more quickly and then she was struggling to keep up with his pace.

Finally, they reached the carriage, and the footman opened the door and saw them safely stowed inside before shutting it and putting the step up. Penelope leaned back and closed her eyes, jolted slightly as the carriage started rolling. She opened them to find her father's gaze upon her.

"Penelope?"

"Yes, Papa?"

"What is wrong?"

"I don't know..."

"You know what I mean. I brought you here because it used to make you happy, and I have noticed lately that you aren't so."

Penelope glanced down at her clenched hands and untangled them slowly. "Papa...it is Reggie."

“What about him?”

“He doesn’t want me, and I don’t know what to do.”

Aloysius looked out the window, then brought his attention back to his daughter. “How do you know?”

“He made it clear, Papa. I’m not good enough for him.”

A tear leaked out the corner of her eye and she struggled with the laces of her reticule, finally opening it and pulling a handkerchief out. She swallowed and sighed as she dabbed her eyes gently with the small slip of cambric.

Aloysius leaned forward and placed his hand on hers. “Penelope, you are valued by someone who appreciates you for you. Don’t give up on that.”

“Perhaps, but I want Reggie, and I can’t seem to change that.”

“But Captain Coulter...?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “He is a perfect gentleman.”

“He seems to like you?”

“Yes, but...”

“No ‘buts.’ Just accept his attentions. Perhaps your feelings will change, and you will find that Captain Coulter is the man for you after all?”

“And if he’s not?”

“No harm done in accepting the attentions of a well-behaved man.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“All right then!” He leaned back and let his attention wander to the window and the city lights passing by.

The carriage pulled up in front of their home and they moved quickly up the short path to the front door. Once it opened for them, Penelope relinquished her shawl and stepped quickly up the staircase to her room. Edith met her to help her undress. She had some trouble with the laces of her corset, but soon enough Penelope was dressed in her nightgown and slipping between the cool sheets of her bed.

Her mind all but spun as she considered her father’s words. She had already accepted Captain Coulter’s attentions, if only to make Reggie jealous in an act that she knew was beneath her. She closed her eyes against it, for now a perfectly respectable man was paying court to her, and she wondered what to do. As her father had said, there was no harm in it, except to him, and that was what pained her. She did not want to string him along...

But was she? Was there any part of her that could accept him, should he ask?

In her heart, she knew the answer to that.

Morning came with a thunderclap just outside her window and she shot up from bed, clutching the neck of her nightgown.

Edith bustled in, saying, “Oh, miss, there’s a terrible storm outside. The streets are flooded!”

Penelope rose, slipped on her house shoes, and drew her dressing gown around her. Glancing in the mirror, she checked that her cap was on straight and covered her mussed hair, before going downstairs to the dining room for

breakfast.

The window streamed with water as rain poured down from the heavens. She watched it, mesmerized, as she ate her eggs and toast. She was not surprised to find that her father had already eaten and hurried off to a meeting in town.

Cool air lay about the house, but she decided against getting dressed and instead went to the piano. There, she warmed up for a moment before starting on a lively concerto in her favorite key, in time with the rain lashing against the windows. She let the instrument bang out the music as loudly as it would go, as though competing with the sounds of nature itself.

The last chords were vibrating away when she rose to stand by the window. The postman rushed up the walk with his umbrella and she waited to see if there were any letters for her. Within moments, a light step announced Edith's approach and she held out a hand for the proffered letters. One was from Henrietta, one was from Eliza, and the other was from Captain Coulter.

She curled onto the settee beside the window and opened first the letter from Captain Coulter.

My dear Miss Pratt,

We are anchored outside of Southampton after a rather wild ride around Eire. Storm caught us on the northern edge and chased us for about two hundred leagues. We are still pumping the ship out. Luckily, we had no extra passengers or horses or other livestock in the hold to worry about.

Enough of that. You must forgive this sailor if he talks too much about his ship. It is my life, you see, as any person connected to me must understand.

I will next be docked in London on the 24th and would be happy if I might call upon you. Unfortunately for me, your letter will probably be waiting for me in London. If, that is, you even write to me. I will understand if you do not choose to do so and will take that as I am sure it will be meant.

I await your next letter,

Captain Desmond Coulter

Penelope folded the letter and sat, thinking. Though her heart did none of the flips it did when Reggie wrote to her, she was sensible of her good fortune in having one such as he courting her. She sighed, though, and wished she had a different future.

Slowly, she read her other two letters. Henrietta was slightly panicked as the realization of impending motherhood settled around her, and Eliza was calmly exuberant over feeling her child moving. Both were happy in their mates and lives, supremely so.

Her fingers lingered over the writing on the page as she considered her own impending life.

Rising, she carried her letters upstairs to her room and secreted them away in her desk, before going to the wardrobe to choose something to wear. Edith appeared and for a while they were occupied in getting her dressed in

her pale pink morning gown. Penelope sat at her little table, slipping on her earrings and tweaking her hair. She sighed and went downstairs.

The bell rang, and Penelope watched as the butler strode to the door and opened it to admit a young lady with flaming red hair coiffed under a beautiful straw bonnet.

“Miss Augusta Abernethy,” Jerrod intoned.

Penelope came forward and the two girls curtsied. Augusta immediately blushed and Penelope motioned her into the parlor and sat down with a questioning expression. “I’m sorry, but have we met?”

“Oh!” Augusta said in a rather breathless tone, “No. But I am friends with Henrietta, and she asked if I would be so good as to call upon you. She and I did the Season together, you see. At least, some of it. There was a bit of a falling out at the end, but we straightened all that out. There was such a misunderstanding.”

“Oh, yes! I should have remembered.”

Augusta smiled ruefully. “I’m not terribly memorable.”

“Nonsense, you are quite striking! Do you live nearby?”

“On the far side of Chelsea. Do you ride?”

Penelope’s eyebrows rose as she answered, “Why yes, though not much these days. My horse is in town, however.”

“Perhaps you would ride with me sometime?”

“I should love to. When?”

“Um...Thursday next?”

“Yes, I believe I can do that. Shall we simply meet at Hyde Park?”

“Oh, yes!”

There was a little silence, then Penelope asked, “How did your Season go?”

Augusta sighed. “Well, I had one proposal. My cousin Cedric. But I eventually declined. I think he asked everyone before kidnapping Henrietta.”

“Oh my, that was him?”

“Indeed. My family was so ashamed of him. But, he managed to find a girl who would have him. They are married now.”

“Have you any suitors?”

“Well, yes. He is a merchant’s son, however, and my parents had wanted someone different, you see.”

“Yes, I do see. But what do you want?”

Her face softened. “I like Jonas Smatterby immensely. He rides and drives his own gig. He is handsome and seems to admire me excessively.”

Penelope laughed. “And that is the real secret, isn’t it?”

Augusta nodded. “And you, have you anyone in particular?”

Penelope sighed. “That is complicated. There is a man, but he won’t have me. There is another man, a sea captain, who seems to be courting me...but I am not sure.”

“Ah. Yes. And how should you like being married to a sea captain?”

“That’s just it, I can’t imagine it yet. I can’t yet let go of...well. Another.”

“And yet we must marry, as my parents tell me frequently.”

“Indeed.”

A heavy silence fell. Augusta took a deep breath and said, “These biscuits are lovely.”

“Oh, thank you. Our cook does them especially well.”

“Our cook makes these hard little things. But her soups and sauces are lovely.”

Augusta rose after a time and the girls hugged as they said goodbye. Penelope stared through the window as she climbed into her carriage. London seemed a little less lonely.

Almost two weeks later, Captain Coulter was announced at the Pratt residence. Penelope wore her green silk dress with the organza overskirt and her grandmother’s peridot parure. Not all of it, of course, but enough to look dazzling even if she didn’t quite feel it. The captain glanced up as she came down the stairs. His expression of admiration helped coax a slight smile to her face and be a little more enthusiastic in her greeting.

“Captain! So good to see you safe on land. Your story of the storm was quite frightening.”

“Well, it was worth it to be here with you...and you, Mr. Pratt. With both of you.” He seemed a little self-conscious.

Aloysius led the way into the parlor, where several candles illuminated the room. They made small talk for a while until being called for dinner.

Penelope was quiet through dinner. While her father drew out particulars from Captain Coulter’s childhood in Lyme and his initial enrolment as a young midshipman, she kept her eyes mostly on her plate, glancing up occasionally and forcing the corners of her mouth upward whenever Captain Coulter’s gaze fell upon her, which was often.

After dessert, she withdrew to the parlor while the men partook of the port. She sat at the piano and played softly, thinking of Lytchley, and seeing Reggie when she opened the door. Voices broke into her reverie and she glanced up. The two men stepped into the room, and Captain Coulter’s look of approval settled on her.

She played for some time—everything except a love song. That, she could not bring herself to do. Captain Coulter left around one o’clock, bending over her hand and thanking her for a lovely evening. They watched him get into his cab and ride into the steam rising off the streets.

Her father pulled her back into the house and said, “Penelope, that man means business, and sailors do not court long. He will be declaring himself soon, so you need to have your answer. I need not tell you it is not certain you will get another such offer.”

“I know, Papa. He is a good man, and any girl in my situation would be happy of his attentions.”

He waited for a moment, as though hoping for more, but she simply clutched his arm briefly and headed up the stairs to bed.

A note came for her the next morning. She recognized Captain Coulter's hand and opened it with a frown.

My dear Miss Pratt,

I must thank you again for a wonderful evening. I regret that my current schedule precludes me having the pleasure of your company in the near future. My plans at present are uncertain, but I will inform you as soon as I am back in London.

Please know that my thoughts are of you, and you only. I can only hope you sometimes think of me. Pray for me as we battle the ocean once again.

Your devoted friend,

Captain Desmond Coulter

Sighing, she folded up it and carried it slowly upstairs. Another day, and still no word from Reggie.

She slipped Captain Coulter's letter into her drawer and sat at the little vanity. Scattered across its surface were small reminders of her life in London. There was her hairbrush, comb, and mirror set, inherited from her mother on her death. There, in a little tray, was a pair of hair combs her grandmother had given her as a child. She fingered one, noting that the silver needed polishing. A vase with a few feathers stuck in it from a childhood collection stood to one side and she picked up a bright blue feather, smoothing it gently through her fingers.

What would she take with her if she married the captain? Where would she live? On a ship with him? Some women did, she knew. It was when she thought of the intimacies of marriage that she quailed. Could she do that with him? In her mind, she exchanged Reggie for the captain and experienced something completely different. A rush of desire went through her and she gasped, turning from her vanity.

She closed her eyes and stood there, one hand on her stomach, calming herself and waiting for the tangle of emotions to clear. They did not, though they lessened after a moment, allowing her to breathe. Anguish welled up inside her—a combination of loss where Reggie was concerned, and terror for Captain Coulter.

How to do this thing her father wanted her to do? Agree to a marriage when her heart was not engaged, when the desires of her soul and her body were not ignited? She could not—she would not!

She would. She knew.

Chapter Eighteen

Reggie stepped on board the ship; his legs once again had to struggle with the steady movement. His gaze travelled over the crew and other passengers, all turned pale amber by the spectacles Dr. Hartenger had insisted he continue to wear. He climbed down the stairs and checked his cabin briefly, ensuring his trunk had been stowed within. The ship, *Artemis*, was larger than the *Tempest*, and there were many more passengers aboard. He went back up to the deck and stood beside the railing, out of the way of the crew.

A family of four came aboard, well-heeled and fashionable; a father who appeared to be ex-military, his wife who had a rather sour expression, a daughter about Reggie's age and a son of about fourteen.

The wife spoke with a flutter of her hand. "Major Ramsley, could we not take the other ship?"

She spoke with an accent, which Reggie thought to be Portuguese, and had dark hair fading elegantly to silver. Her daughter, also a brunette, had dark flashing eyes that seemed wont to flash in Reggie's direction.

"My dear, this is the most direct passage to Lisbon. We have no other options."

She turned her head away as Major Ramsley caught Reggie's eye and nodded in acknowledgement. He made his way over to the railing with his family in tow and said, "Major Ramsley, formerly of the 33rd Foot Regiment. My wife Ava, my daughter Alicia, and my son Michael."

"Lieutenant Reginald Darrow."

"Lord Loughton's son?"

"Indeed—do you know my father?"

"Same club in London, my boy. Know him well. I'd heard you went into the cavalry."

"Yes, sir. Just returning. Got banged up pretty bad at Salamanca."

"How brave," Alicia whispered.

Reggie acknowledged her with a brief nod but returned his focus back to Major Ramsley. The man had turned, lifting a hand in the captain's direction. Once he'd finished giving an order, the captain then began to head toward them.

He looked at a pocket watch as he neared them, cast his glance about the ship, then continued on his way until he stood just before them. "Sir, can I be of assistance?"

"Just wanted to introduce ourselves."

"Captain Cornelius Fletcher, at your service."

Major Ramsley introduced the rest, and Reggie nodded when his own name was pronounced.

"I hope you will all join me at my table for dinner this evening. At least those of you able to eat," Captain Fletcher said.

"Er, yes. Can be a rough thing, ship travel. How are the seas shaping up?" Major Ramsley gazed about with an interested air.

"Sky is clear for now, but it is a bit choppy. May be a bit of a rough start."

Mrs. Ramsley shuddered, and her daughter took her hand and rubbed it between her own. Reggie was touched by the small gesture and peered with more interest at Alicia. Though not a remarkable beauty, her countenance had a calm serenity that was soothing to the eye.

Suddenly, an image of Penelope and Captain Coulter rose before him and his face hardened. He glanced at Alicia to see that she had noticed the change and recoiled somewhat. *Well*, he thought, *let her*. She had best get used to his mercurial ways if they were to be thrown together during the voyage.

He nodded to them and turned away, heading to the forecandle to watch the crew from the opposite railing as they made their preparations to sail. The captain strode across the deck and climbed the steps up the forecandle with a spare nod in his direction. Reggie leaned over and peered into the water below. A large fish flipped through the water alongside the ship and then deep green water closed over its silvery form.

Dinner was a surprisingly elegant affair. The ship had slipped her moorings uneventfully and was coursing along through the slightly choppy water. Mrs. Ramsley and her son were notably absent from the company and the major made their apologies.

"Sea's a bit rough for them."

"Mother is less indisposed than Michael, but does not want to leave him," Alicia said.

Captain and Major Ramsley eased into a discussion about the war and Alicia turned toward Reggie, saying, "I understand you are from Yorkshire."

"Yes, I am. My father's estate is in northeast Yorkshire. In a small village called Lytchley."

"Sounds very provincial."

"Yes, I suppose so. And you, where are you from?"

"Cornwall. Clarkton. A not-quite-so-small town."

"Why are you going to Lisbon?"

"My grandparents live near there and my mother has been wanting to see them."

“Not such a good time to be travelling if you don’t need to.”

“My grandfather is very ill, so...”

“Ah. All of my grandparents are dead. I envy those who have living grandparents. I don’t know what that would be like.”

One corner of her mouth twitched upward. “Well, neither do I, to be honest. The last time I saw them, I was very young, and they speak only a little English, so letters are a trial.”

“Mmm. Yes, I can see that. When I was last in Portugal, I was astonished at how difficult it is to communicate with others who don’t speak English. Something I hadn’t ever thought about, but now, of course, I do.”

Her eyes lit up. “Yes, I can imagine. Were you badly hurt at Salamanca?”

He nodded but was silent for a moment. “A good friend of mine died, and I think that hurt more than the wounds I acquired. Still...” He looked up and smiled as though to change the gloomy track of their conversation. “My friends came to my rescue and carried me back to England.”

“Friends?”

“Yes, parents and...er, a friend who is a neighbor. Penelope Pratt—do you know her?”

She shook her head. “No. She sounds rather remarkable.”

“Yes. Yes, she is.”

“Alicia?” Her father called. “What was the name of that gentleman who called while we were in London?”

“Travers, Father. Archibald Travers.”

“Yes, yes. Son of a milliner. Made a great fortune and looks to make an even greater one in this war. Called some once or twice while we were in town. Delightful family, despite, er, hmmmph.” He seemed to lose his direction and waved it away. “His family were having problems with privateers taking shipments.”

“It continues to be a problem. But, as long as there is nothing military on board, the French seem to leave us alone for the most part.”

“I am military,” Reggie said.

“Might be best if you avoided regimentals while we cross.”

“Not sure my commanding officers would agree.”

“Well then, how about a command from me that you avoid military uniform while on board.”

“Yes, sir,” Reggie said.

Dinner wound down with Alicia taking her leave as the port was brought out. Reggie forced himself to drink it, though it was not his favorite beverage. When it was over and the conversation had died, he excused himself and made his way to his cabin to sleep.

For two days, they sailed the channel and headed south toward Portugal. On the third day, however, a smudge on the horizon had many of the crew upset. Reggie peered out toward it, but it was too small for him to make out

what it was. Captain Fletcher perched on the edge of the forecandle with spyglass in hand. He stood for some minutes focused on it, then lowered the glass and barked an order.

The idle sails were hauled up. They bloomed outward as the breeze filled them and the ship took on a greater momentum. Reggie reached out to steady himself as the deck seemed wont to move out from beneath him. He looked down at the water split and rising from the forward peak of the hull. His gaze swung back toward the smudge which had gotten larger.

His heart leaped a little in his chest as the smudge resolved into a ship.

It gained quickly on them and, as it neared, Reggie could see its large sails and smooth body made it a swift moving ship. A booming sound echoed across the water and something exploded in the water nearby.

Captain Fletcher ordered the sails dropped and the ship slowed to a standstill.

Reggie frowned and looked at Major Ramsley, who had come up on deck. "Why are we stopping?"

The major nodded toward the other ship. "Damn French ship is too fast and has cannons. They'll blow a hole in the *Artemis* if the captain doesn't stop."

Reggie watched as the French ship neared and tossed lines over to anchor the ships together as the crew prepared to board. He glanced down to ensure there was nothing in his appearance that bespoke of an officer of the British army and steeled himself for what was to come.

The French captain came aboard with a pistol in one hand. His band of sailors went through the *Artemis's* crew, collecting any weapons they could find. They went through the ship in an efficient manner, collecting the bottles of perfumed oil and bolts of cloth from the hull and whatever private possessions they could find. Mrs. Ramsley cried out when one brought her pearls up from below, but her husband calmed her with a hand to her shoulder.

Suddenly, one of the French crew came running up the stairs holding Reggie's red dress coat.

He stiffened as the French captain fingered the braid and considered all assembled. In accented English, he said, "Who does this coat belong to? There is a bounty out for English soldiers."

No one moved, and no one spoke.

The French captain cocked his pistol and aimed it at the captain. "Which one is the soldier?"

The captain's eyes never wavered, though Reggie thought they nearly flicked toward him. The captain's gaze went over the passengers and then stopped at Reggie. He swung the pistol around to point at him, and in an instant, all the horror stories he had heard of French prisoners of war camps swirled through his mind and he panicked.

Without thinking, he spun and bolted toward the opposite end of the

deck. The pistol cracked and the wood beside him splintered upward, but he vaulted smoothly over the side of the ship and downward into the gray-blue water.

Chapter Nineteen

Penelope guided her horse slowly around the green at Hyde Park. The so-called “Rotten Row” seemed a peaceful place that morning. Mrs. Ainsworth sat to one side, supervising her charge.

Augusta trotted up to her and grinned at Penelope. Her own riding habit was a deep brown, while Penelope’s was a deep, dark green topped by a black hat with just a little green ribbon at the crown.

Penelope’s horse, Dame, moved placidly along. Still rather early in her horse-riding days, her mount was stolid and calm, and only rarely became excited. Now was not such a time. Penelope thought her horse’s eyes were very nearly closed at the moment. Augusta’s horse seemed far more animated, and its lively nature seemed to lift Dame’s head a little.

Penelope glanced over and caught the eye of a gentleman riding nearby on a shining black horse. He reined over and tipped his hat.

“Good day!”

She nodded and said, “Sir,” before glancing away.

“Oh, don’t be like that—we’ve met before. We even danced at your friend, Mrs. Strathom’s, some weeks ago.”

Penelope frowned lightly and peered once more at the blond man with the dark eyes. “Lord...”

“Just an Honorable. John Wixley, at your service, Miss Pratt.”

“Hello.” She smiled, and he reined a little closer.

“Would you introduce me to your friend?”

Penelope indicated Augusta and said, “Miss Augusta Abernethy.”

“Do you often come to Rotten Row?” he asked.

Penelope shook her head. “Not as often as I would like. It takes the grooms and my chaperone, the carriage...just a lot of work for me to have a ride around the park.”

“Yes, it isn’t like the country. Simply call down and a groom gets your horse ready in a trice. Nice gallop across the ha-ha and perhaps over a fence or two, and then one can call it a day. Rather quiet here.”

“Well, it is just about my speed, so I don’t mind, much. But,” she added, “I can see how it might seem rather tame to you.”

“Do you prefer country or town?”

She shrugged, her long face crumpling slightly into a frown. "I'm not sure I can choose. I like different things about both. There is rather more to do in town, but I like the familiarity of the country, I think."

"Yes. Our country home is in Kent, south of London. I may talk about town all the time, but I miss the wilderness around our country house."

"I have never been to Kent. What is it like?"

"I imagine it is much like anywhere."

"I am from Yorkshire; surely, it is different."

"There, I grant you. I was in Yorkshire once. The moors!"

"Yes! In late spring they are bursting with purple and yellow flowers. The wind nearly cries as it blows over the rolling moors...but you will think I rhapsodize."

"Not at all. I see we are both country souls at heart."

She smiled and he returned it. Augusta's horse stamped and Dame's head shot up and she nearly broke into a trot.

They rode in silence for a pace before he turned and said, "Perhaps I might call upon you some time, if you would allow it."

"Oh, well, of course."

Unease twisted around her heart and she nearly panicked for a moment, wondering what Reggie would say. Then, she reminded herself that Reggie had closed himself off from her and her chest tightened.

Her gaze dropped to her hands, gloved and clutching the reins. She swallowed and saw that the seam along her thumb was coming loose. She glanced up and tried to smile. She glanced over at Augusta and an expression of pity crossed her face.

The Honorable John Wixley nodded politely and reined his horse off toward a group of young men. Penelope turned Dame toward the bend in the path. Augusta sighed.

Penelope said, "I think I would like to be married, just so this sort of thing will stop. I can't imagine what the Season must be like."

"It is grueling. Everything is geared toward making a good match, and heaven help you if you don't."

"Did heaven help you?"

"Nothing did. But perhaps something will come of Mr. Smatterby." She glanced over at Penelope and smiled, causing her to laugh.

They finished their ride and parted on even more friendly terms. Penelope rode toward Mrs. Ainsworth, then waited for the groom to come forward and take control of her horse before sliding down from her back.

"Who were you talking to, dear?" Mrs. Ainsworth asked.

She had returned from her nephew's home with a new hairstyle of fringe around her face. She touched it repeatedly, as though to make sure it was there and arranged properly. Penelope thought it made her face seem a little less vapid, but Mrs. Ainsworth wasn't sure about it yet.

"Miss Augusta Abernethy."

“No, I meant the young man who rode with you briefly.”

“Oh! The Honorable John Wixley of Kent. We met and danced at Henrietta’s ball a few weeks ago.”

“An acquaintance. That is fortuitous.”

A moment of pique seized Penelope as she strode toward the carriage ahead of her chaperone. Why did everything seem to revolve around men paying attention to her? She was heartily sick of it. Men, men, men. And boys. She was sick of the lot of them.

Without waiting for the footman to lower the step, Penelope climbed into the carriage and took her seat, staring firmly out the window. Mrs. Ainsworth huffed up behind her and sat on the opposite side, fanning herself.

“Oh, this heat! Better for my knees but, oh! One gets so damp!”

Penelope said nothing. Her momentary anger had turned instead to tears that threatened to spill over. She sniffed silently and fought to keep her composure. Mrs. Ainsworth puffed and continued to fan herself while the carriage started up and they rolled along the street toward home.

Once there, Penelope strode firmly to her room, hardly waiting for Edith before unbuttoning her jacket and shrugging out. She sighed in relief as the hot riding habit was shed and the lighter afternoon dress was lowered over her head and fastened up the back.

“Ah, such a contrast.” She pushed her feet into the house slippers and went downstairs to the dining room for a cold luncheon.

Slices of ham and cold salads were set out for her and Mrs. Ainsworth to take their fill. Penelope ate heartily, truly hungry after her morning ride. When she had finished, she rose and went to the instrument in the parlor.

Gently running her fingers along the keys, she began a solemn love song that had been in her mind all morning. As she played, she danced once again at Henrietta’s ball, except this time Reggie was there and partnering her. Not in the playful way of his youth, but seriously, staring deep into her eyes as they moved together in time with the music.

Some minutes passed before she realized that she had stopped playing. Her fingers lay idle on the keys and a tear traced its way down her cheek. With a silent snuffle, she wiped the tear away and adjusted the music before her. Selecting a piece, she played it through, then repeated a difficult section a few times before playing it through once again.

She looked up when Henrietta Strathom was announced. She rose and went to her friend, embracing her soundly. But Henrietta held her tightly, and Penelope pulled back to note the strain evident on her friend’s face.

“What is it? What has happened?”

“It’s Reggie... We just got a note from the captain of the ship he was sailing. They were boarded by French privateers who tried to kidnap Reggie. He threw himself overboard instead.”

Penelope screamed, her voice dying quickly into a whisper, and she collapsed against her friend. “No, no—it cannot be!”

“George goes even now to the dock to speak with the captain and collect Reggie’s things. I have written to Mother and Father and expect them from Lytchley in a few days’ time. But what can we do? He is gone!” She broke down into tears and the two women held tightly to one another as they cried together.

A thought seemed to strike Penelope and she pulled back to say, “Is it sure that he is gone? Perhaps another ship found him...?”

“We can ask George when he returns.”

Henrietta wiped her face rather inelegantly with her handkerchief, and Penelope did the same. Together they sat on the sofa, clutching each other’s hand like a lifeline. Time lurched by, struggling through the waters of their grief.

Finally, a carriage sounded in the street and George’s quick step was heard on the path. Henrietta surged to her feet, still clinging to Penelope when George was announced.

“George! What news?”

He came to her and pulled her to him. “Dearest, he is gone. The damned privateers hunted for him and could not find him. Captain Fletcher said there were no boats in the area. You must steel yourself...”

Penelope sank back onto the sofa and buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders twitched as black waves of grief closed over her.

A touch like a warm ray of sun fell upon her shoulder and lifted her tearstained face to see George standing over her. “Penelope, I must take Henrietta home. Come with us.”

She almost went. Then, with a sigh, she sniffed and shook her head. “You will soon have her parents there, and my presence would be no balm for them. I will be well, I promise. I must just mourn him...” Her voice broke and she brought her twisted handkerchief once more to her eyes.

George led Henrietta from the room, and the front door closed behind them. Somewhere out on the street a carriage started to clatter along. When they were gone, she rose and climbed slowly to her room and lay on her bed, finally giving way to the whole of her grief.

Hours later, Edith brought a tray in to find her lying silent on the counterpane, a sodden handkerchief clutched in one hand.

“Miss, sit up and take some tea. We’ll put extra sugar in it.”

Penelope pushed herself up, and Edith set the tray down, coming to help her out of her dress and corset and into a nightdress and dressing gown. Penelope was struck numb, doing as bidden mindlessly.

When she was completely changed out of her clothes, Edith brought her a cup of tea and placed it in her hands. After a moment, Penelope seemed to notice it and lifted it to her lips to drink, but her eyes brimmed immediately, and the cup began to shake. Edith took it quickly from her and she lay down, facing away as another sob broke free from her chest.

Penelope did not hear Edith set the cup back on the tray, or the door shut

softly behind her.

She woke later in the night to find her father sitting on the bed beside her, stroking her hair.

“Papa?”

“Shhh. I just wanted to see you. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Oh, Papa. Is it really true, or have I dreamed it? Is Reggie truly gone?”

She rose up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

“Yes, my dear. I found George’s note when I got home. You must be strong, my dear. He would not want this from you.”

“Oh, Papa, I am trying, but I am breaking my heart and I don’t know how to stop.” She clutched her handkerchief to her chest as her eyes brimmed once more. “Oh, Reggie!”

Her father pulled her awkwardly against his side as she cried anew, patting her shoulder from time to time.

Edith arrived again with a small tumbler and said, “Oh, miss, I brought some laudanum to help ease you to sleep. You’ll feel all the better after a night’s slumber.”

“Yes,”—Aloysius reached for the cup and held it to Penelope’s lips—“drink, my dear. It will ease your pain.”

Choking back a sob, she took the cup and drank the warm brandy with the bitter bite of laudanum mixed within. Making a face, she held the glass out when it was empty. Then she allowed Edith to take down her hair and brush it as she sat on the edge of the bed.

By the time she had plaited it and pinned it under a cap, both the whisky and the laudanum were working, and she lay down, barely recognizing that her father himself covered her up and kissed her gently on the forehead.

Chapter Twenty

For three days, he clung to the scrap of wood he had found floating by. He had plunged deep into the cold water, the shock of it burning like icy flames along his body. Rising, he'd found the ships had drifted away. He'd struck off, remembering his long-ago swimming lessons in a cousin's lake.

He had heard the shouts behind him, heard them fade as he'd kicked tirelessly against the water. He'd paused only to kick off his boots, which had filled with water and had been threatening to pull him down. Feeling infinitesimally small in the expanse of water around him, he'd struggled on, pulling farther from the ships.

It was then he had bumped into the wooden half of a crate and clung to it wildly. He'd kicked to propel he and it as quickly away as possible from the potentially pursuing ships. It wasn't until the sun had set over the chopping sea that he'd realized he was truly alone, and a new fear had settled upon him.

Desperately cold, thirsty, he had held onto the wooden crate and floated, saving his strength. He'd been forced to kick now and then to generate some warmth. What little he had, the sea took quickly.

Over the days, he bobbed in the swells, rising up so he could see in the distance, then sinking back down in the lull between peaks. Overhead, the stars struggled through the blank clouds as the crescent moon pierced the blackness that surrounded him. Weariness came over him and he wove his arms through the slats in the crate to hold fast to it. He rested his head on his arm and blinked against the salted water that seemed to seep into his eyes.

He woke with a thud. Raising his head, he stared blearily at the wall before him. It took several seconds for him to realize that he was staring at a boat, and he quickly shouted. Or tried to—what came out was a hoarse croak.

"Help! Hey, help me!"

A scuttle and a scurry sounded from within the hull, and he swallowed some nonexistent spit to try and wet his throat. Calling out again, he added to it by banging on the hull of the boat. Looking up, he saw a bearded face staring at him in shock. The face disappeared and then reappeared, tossing down a net to him.

Reggie pulled his arms free of the crate and tried to grip the wet ropes, only to find his fingers wouldn't work. Instead, he hooked his arms through

the spaces and held on as it was pulled in.

He fell with a thump onto the deck and struggled for a moment to free himself from the net. Suddenly, hands were everywhere, pulling him up.

His legs were numb and would not respond, so they carried him to a place below deck and quickly undressed him, drying him with sacks and dressing him instead in someone's cast-off clothing. The rough wool scratched but was warm and when they covered his feet with two pairs of socks, he nearly groaned with relief.

Someone brought a mug of warm water laced with honey and lemon, and another brought a blanket to tuck around him carefully. Reggie listened to their chatter, and gauged that they were Portuguese fishermen. He tried to speak, but no one seemed to understand English.

The men stood around, staring at him as he sipped his hot brew and felt it warm him from within. Soon, one stepped forward with a piece of bread and he alternated drinking and nibbling on the somewhat stale chunk. When he had taken all his stomach could handle, he handed the empty cup to one of the fishermen and leaned back.

He fell asleep then woke with a start sometime in the afternoon. Some of the men were seated around the table and made encouraging noises when they saw him awake. He struggled up and two of them rushed over to take him by the arms and help him to the table. Another man dipped up a bowl of some fishy stew, setting it before him.

He nodded, casting his mind back for the Portuguese word to thank them. "*Obrigado.*"

"*De nada,*" they all said with smiles.

The captain turned out to be the man who had rescued him from the ocean. The rest were his crew. They fished during the day, and by the second day were headed back toward port. Reggie was able to walk around unaided by then. He sat in the sun, watching them work but staying out of their way. He stared over the bow, seeing the land come closer and the crew struggle with the sails and the nets, ropes. It was quite dizzying for his still muddled mind.

They came into harbor around midmorning. Reggie had slept on deck with nothing but a blanket. He had watched the stars come out and rotate overhead. Now, dressed in his own clothes, he woke with purpose, knowing he needed to find a way to get word to the army and to his family that he was alive and free of the French.

And, he thought, he needed to write to Penelope and tell her as well. He could not help but wonder how she had reacted to the news of his loss overboard.

As the boat came into port, Reggie pointed to the city all around and asked in English, "Where is this? Aveiro?"

"Aveiro? *Não. Porto!*"

Reggie stood in his socks and waited as they pulled in and the lines were

thrown over to the dock and secured there. He went below and worked to bring the tubs of fish up to carry onto the dock for sale. The men's families all joined in to help, from setting up the tubs to sell the fish to beginning the job of cleaning out the boat.

Reggie watched the activity around him, not knowing what more he could do. A boy came running up to the captain carrying a pair of old boots, and the captain called him over. He walked over in his stockinged feet and the captain handed him the boots, then pointed to his feet.

Grinning, Reggie thanked the captain in Portuguese and quickly donned the boots. They were a bit stiff, but they fit well enough, and he felt better having them on. He looked up at the captain and said, "Aveiro?"

The captain said something to the boy, who turned to Reggie and nodded, then motioned for Reggie to follow him.

The captain stopped them suddenly. "*Espera!*"

Reggie turned and the captain dug in his pocket, then handed out some coins to Reggie. He tried to refuse them, but the captain shook his head and closed his hands over Reggie's.

"*Obrigado.*"

"*De nada. Boa sorte!*"

Reggie followed the boy as he wove through the people and down one of the streets. He paused for a moment, looking around over the people, then led the way across the street to a tavern.

They went inside and the boy said something to one of the men standing by the bar. The man glanced at Reggie, frowning. Then, he nodded and replied. The boy came back to Reggie and held out his hand. Reggie placed a coin in it and the boy handed it to the man who then handed back a smaller coin.

The boy grinned, winked at Reggie, and pocketed the coin before running off out of the tavern.

Reggie understood that he had paid for something. The man motioned him to the bar and shouted to the back of the tavern. Minutes later, a plate was set before him and he realized he was hungry.

The meat and vegetables revived him, as did the bread that accompanied them. By the time he had finished, the tavern man tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the street, saying something Reggie did not understand. He looked, however, and an old coach pulled up. Quickly, he got up and went out to it. The tavern man said something to the driver and gave Reggie a gentle shove into the coach.

The interior was a little dark, and smelled of stale bodies, but he climbed in and sat in an available spot. The driver leaned in and said specifically to Reggie, "Aveiro?"

Reggie nodded fiercely.

Time passed as he sat with the others in the dingy coach. The fabric headliner had long since vanished, and the wood appeared to be rough and

nicked in innumerable places. He leaned back, still a little weak from his time in the sea. His hand rubbed against his stubbled chin and he longed for a shave.

At least, he thought, I am alive!

Suddenly, the coach shook, and Reggie guessed that the driver was climbing back aboard. He heard a muffled shout and the coach started up, rolling down the street. Shops and people passed by, framed in the window. Eventually, Reggie drifted, sleeping on and off throughout the day.

When they stopped in the evening at a tavern, the driver pointed at Reggie and said, “Aveiro.”

Reggie stepped down and stood in the street. The carriage started up once more, leaving him alone. He stared around, not recognizing anything, but realizing he was hungry. He went into the tavern and said, “Something to eat, please.”

“English!” the man said as his eyebrows went up.

Reggie looked up, alertly. “Indeed—do you speak it?”

“Little. What you want?”

“Anything.”

“Coming,” the man said. His dark hair was styled in an English fashion and he was probably Reggie’s age. He grinned at Reggie, pointed to himself and said, “Afonso.”

“Reggie Darrow.”

“Reggidarrow.”

“No, Reggie. Darrow.”

“Ah! *Sim*. Reggie.”

“Yes. Er, *sim*.”

Afonso disappeared through the swinging doors and returned with a bowl of flavorful stew. He set this before him with a glass of what seemed to be beer. Reggie tucked into it, grateful by the time he’d finished for a full belly after a long day’s travel.

When Afonso returned to take his empty bowl, Reggie asked, “Where are the English soldiers?”

Afonso frowned as though thinking of the words. He called a lad over and said something in rapid Portuguese and the boy’s eyes widened. He motioned for him to follow, and Reggie stood, nodding to Afonso as he left.

Sporadic lanterns and windows aglow lit the city mysteriously. The boy led Reggie along the wooden sidewalks and streets for what seemed like an hour. Finally, they ended up at the edge of the small city, looking out over an expanse of tents, with a larger one in the center.

Reggie faced the lad and fished in his pocket for a small coin to hand over. “*Obrigado!*”

“*Obrigado*,” the lad said, taking the coin and running off.

Reggie watched him go before turning back to the camp and working his way along the tents toward the central command one.

A soldier stopped him as he neared the entrance to the tent.

“What’s your business here?”

“I need to see the commander. I am Lieutenant Reginald Darrow of the Yorkshire 3rd Cavalry.”

“Where’s your uniform?”

“That’s a long story that I would rather give to the commander.”

Just then, a white-whiskered man appeared, pushing the tent flap aside.

“What is all this?”

“General Fitzhugh, this is Lieutenant Darrow of the Yorkshire 3rd Cavalry.”

Reggie stood at attention.

Frowning so that his bushy eyebrows joined together over his eyes, the general motioned for Reggie to follow him into the tent and then pointed to a chair. “Sit down and tell me what is going on.”

It took some time for Reggie to explain about the French privateers intending to take him, being lost at sea and rescued, then ending in Porto and travelling back to Aveiro. He waited while the general digested this tale.

“So, your uniform is gone.”

“Yes, sir. I am trying to get back to Colonel Hackett and the 3rd Cavalry.”

“Colonel Hackett was just sent back to England with what was left of the third.”

Reggie’s jaw dropped open. He hastily shut it and said, “Sir, what do I do now? I was coming back to Aveiro because I thought my unit was still here.”

“So they were, until Tuesday last. They are back in England, on their way to Yorkshire by now.”

“What shall I do?”

General Fitzhugh’s expressive eyebrows raised. “Well, son, I suggest you sleep here tonight and see about getting a ship back to England in the morning.”

“Yes, sir. Where shall I sleep?”

“We’ll set you up. Got some empty places unfortunately. Get you some fresh clothes, too.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Heddenfeld!” the general called to the soldier on duty.

“Sir!”

“Take Lieutenant Darrow to the quartermaster. Darrow—good luck.”

“Yes, sir.” He turned to follow Heddenfeld.

Two hours later, with an armful of fresh clothes, the source of which he did not ask, he settled onto a cot and had a moment to think. After everything, he would be going back to England. The irony of his adventure was not lost on him as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-One

The carriage shook and rocked slightly over the uneven road. Mr. Pratt closed his eyes and sighed as he opened them to glance at his daughter. Penelope sensed his regard but ignored it and turned toward the window.

“The rains have washed out parts of the road.”

“Indeed.”

Silence fell, broken only by the rattle of the wheels on the gravel. The carriage rocked again, and Penelope’s eyes squeezed shut.

“I hope the damn thing holds up. I don’t want to lose a wheel in this.”

Penelope did not care one way or another. She sat still despite the rattling and rocking of the carriage. Suddenly, there was a loud clunk and part of it listed to one side and stopped.

Aloysius fumed, then got up and exited to go inspect the damage. Penelope slid over and stepped free to stand to one side while the problem was elucidated. The carriage driver, footman, and Aloysius all stood around the offending wheel.

“Well, the good news is it isn’t broken.”

The driver stared at the wheel. It had sunk nearly to the axle in a muddy rut. “But it is stuck, sir. We’re gonna ‘ave to put our shoulders to it.”

The footman and Aloysius both got behind the carriage near the wheel. Meanwhile, the driver went to the horses and started encouraging them to pull hard. Groans from the two men behind could be heard, and Penelope saw the carriage lift slightly, then sink back down as the two men let out great “oomphs” of breath and straightened.

Aloysius looked at the trunks secured to the top of the carriage and said, “They’ll have to come down.”

The footman nodded and climbed up to untie them, then he and the driver lifted them down onto the side of the road. Meanwhile, another carriage came up beside them and a man leaned out the window.

“What’s going on here?”

“Carriage is stuck. We’re pushing it out.”

“We can help.” He turned his head up toward the driver and said, “Pull over and let us out.”

Soon, three men got out of the new arrival and came to stand behind the

Pratt carriage. With a great heave, they managed to lift it out of the rut until it rolled freely once again. They let out a great “huzzah” and stepped back.

Aloysius shook hands with them all and they climbed back into their own waiting carriage as the Pratts’ footman and driver began reloading the trunks. The other carriage started off and Aloysius stared ruefully at his pants—they now had muddy streaks on them.

“Papa, wait for it to dry and then brush it off,” Penelope said.

“Yes, good idea. Come on, then, back into the carriage.”

The footman helped her in, and they started off once more.

Checking his pocket watch, Aloysius clucked, saying, “Cost us nearly two hours.”

“We’ll get there, Papa.”

“Yes, yes. Just a matter of time.”

To Penelope, the thought of time stretched out before her, empty of everything. Reggie gone...what was she to do? She had not realized how much she had hoped he would relent and declare for her until it was no longer possible for him to do so.

Tears threatened and she steeled herself against them. She did not think she had any left to mourn him. Breathing in deeply, she let out a tiny sigh that earned her father’s attention.

“Penelope?”

“Yes, Papa?”

“Are you quite well?”

She bit her lip against the anguished truth and said simply, “Yes, Papa.”

“Truly?”

A pause. “No, but I will be.”

After a moment, he said, “I suppose that is the best we can hope for.”

The rest of the journey went smoothly despite the rough roads. They arrived somewhat late to Lytchley and stumbled quite relieved into the back door. Mrs. Devry was dipping up plates of food for all of them. They trooped to their rooms to freshen up, then returned to the dining room where warm plates of roast and vegetables awaited. They ate in silence, and Penelope excused herself when her plate was still half full.

The next day dawned cloudless and warm. Penelope sat staring out the window, knowing she needed to visit her friend Eliza, but feeling unable to do so. She knew the talk would be about one thing, and one thing only—and she did not think she could bear it. Even sympathy at that point would be painful.

She was saved the difficulty of making a decision. A knock came in the late morning, and Eliza was shown into the parlor. Grabbing a fresh handkerchief, Penelope went downstairs to greet her.

Eliza had bloomed in the weeks since Penelope had seen her. Now, there was no doubt that she was carrying a child. Penelope nearly forgot her sorrow in her delight for her friend.

“Eliza, you look absolutely wonderful!”

Dropping a hand onto the prominent mound, Eliza colored and said, “I know I am not supposed to talk about it—we are supposed to pretend it doesn’t exist. And yet, it is all I want to talk about!”

Penelope smiled and hugged her friend.

Eliza’s perceptive gaze settled on her. “And you, my friend? How are you doing?”

Dragging in a silent breath, Penelope turned away. A tear glistened at the corner of her eye. “I think I am done with crying, and then it starts up again.”

“Oh, my dear. Then let it out.”

Penelope dabbed the tear away and shook her head. “No, I’ve done enough. I need to be strong and find a way to go on. It isn’t as though we were engaged or anything.”

Eliza rubbed her arm gently then led her to the sofa to sit, unconsciously taking over the role of hostess. When Mrs. Devry brought in tea, it was Eliza who poured it.

“I’m being a terrible hostess...”

“Nonsense. You are letting me boss you around.”

Penelope smiled briefly. “I cannot imagine you bossing anyone. You would just encourage them so sweetly, they would gladly do your bidding.”

Eliza laughed. “Nonsense! You will have me blushing. Now, how was the trip up from London?”

“Oh...the road was terrible. Our wheel became stuck, and Father had to help push it out. He was cross over the time wasted.”

“At least nothing was broken!”

“Yes, we were grateful for that.”

A little silence fell, and Penelope cast around for something to say—anything but the one thing her heart and mind came back to.

The bell rang, and Mrs. Devry answered it. A few moments later, and she stood in the entrance to the parlor announcing, “Mrs. Welles.”

Penelope steeled herself as Addie Welles swept into the room.

She sat in the nearest chair and fanned herself. “Goodness, it is hot out there. Nice and cool in here, probably due to the oak tree shading this side of the house. Normally I would think it an inconvenience, but on these rare summer days it is a blessing.”

She adjusted her gown and her eyes settled on Eliza’s bump. She sniffed and continued on. “Lizzie Walthrop has left the Bucket and Bull. All in a rush to marry Bob Englebrook. The inn is put in a very difficult spot now—who is to serve in the pub? I thought of suggesting Beryl Hancock, but just heard that she is getting married, too. They’ll have to go to Stanton to find someone at this rate.”

Her hawk-like gaze fastened upon Penelope and sharpened. “You look tired, dear. Was the journey awful?” Penelope opened her mouth to answer, and Mrs. Welles continued, “Of course it was, after all that rain. Road fairly washed out in places. Wouldn’t be surprised if you got stuck along the way. I

have often wished we could travel to London or the south of England, but going into Stanton yesterday was bad enough." She paused and turned to Eliza. "And so, how are you doing, Lady Strathom?"

"Quite well, and you?"

"Oh, well enough. Had a touch of rheumatism with the rain, but then, what do you expect at my age. Never been sick a day in my life, but the rheumatism has caught up with me. Don't let it slow me down, though. You"—she nodded to Penelope—"needn't let a rough trip stop you, either. Just push through it, you'll be all right." She sighed, and her expression softened as she said, "I expect you've heard the sad news. The Honorable Reginald Darrow is lost. Went overboard rather than let some French privateers barter him for a bounty. I've heard it is grim for the prisoners of war over there, but still I wish he had stopped rather than go over. They say both ships searched for him, but he was gone. There, there." She reached over and patted Penelope's hand after tears splashed down on it. "Your sweet nature is moved, to be sure. As we all are to think of such a fine young man taken in his prime..."

"Mrs. Welles, would you do me a favor and escort me home? I am feeling unwell suddenly and do not wish to walk alone in my condition." Eliza rose and reached for her.

Mrs. Welles stood and immediately took Eliza's arm. "Certainly, my dear, I wonder what has come over you. Yes, let me escort you home—Haddley will know what to do. That excellent woman!"

Penelope watched them go, sending a heartfelt thanks after her friend for finding a way to get rid of Mrs. Welles.

When the door had shut securely behind them, she gave herself over to the tears which had been barely held back. Her shoulders racked and shook violently with silent sobs. By the time she quieted, her handkerchief was soaked, and her head hurt unbearably.

Suddenly, Mrs. Devry was there, holding out a cup to her. "When I get a headache, I take a few sips of this and feel better."

Penelope sipped at it and found it to taste like sweetened tea with a slightly bitter aftertaste. "What is it?"

"Just a tea made with willow bark. It helps and is quite safe."

"Thank you, Mrs. Devry."

"Drink it up, now, and let's not tell your father. He mistrusts old Mary Devry's potions."

Penelope drained the cup and handed it back. Mrs. Devry placed it on the tea tray and carried it all off to the kitchen. Watching her go, Penelope leaned against the back of the chair and closed her eyes, willing the willow bark to work. Soon enough, the throbbing in her brain went down and she could open her eyes to stare dully at the room around her.

She caught sight of the piano and rose slowly, heading toward it. Sitting down at the instrument, she picked out a melancholic tune with one hand, then

added the harmony with the other. After a few minutes of listless playing, she grew more determined and allowed it to carry her up and out of herself, expressing her pain in the only way she knew how.

When she had finished, she glanced up to see her father standing in the arched entrance to the room. She swallowed and looked down, knowing her eyes were rimmed with red from crying earlier.

Her father came in and sat down in the chair nearest the piano. "Penelope, I am aware of how much the loss of the Darrow boy has affected you."

She sniffed but said nothing.

"And, I have no homilies to help you in your present grief. Times like this, I miss your mother deeply. She would have known what to do."

Penelope nodded. "I miss Mama, too. In a strange way, this has brought all my sorrow for her out as well."

"Yes, I can see that it might. Even me..." He turned away and added after a pause, "You must see to the future, though. Not now, I know that to be impossible. But soon. There are others who would be happy to know you, and to keep you. You must look forward to that."

She swallowed but did not trust herself to speak. He waited for a moment, thinking she might, then rose and patted her on the shoulder before leaving her alone.

Watching him go, she was suddenly tired. Rising slowly, she went in search of her room, calling Edith. The maid followed her and helped her to get undressed, and then she curled up under the covers of her bed and wished herself to sleep.

It was a long time coming.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Clouds skittered across the sky as Reggie glanced upward. The weather held the definite promise of fall, and the wind blowing the clouds promised a rough ride across the sea. He clutched his coat shut, knowing he was wearing a cast-off from some soldier who had died in the fighting. He sent a silent note of thanks to whoever had left behind the clothing.

The ship sat rocking lightly in the rough waters of the harbor. He had waited days before one headed for England was able to take him. Now, he shuddered a little in anticipation of what the journey might hold for him. At least, he thought, there was no uniform to trip him up this time.

He had not written his parents yet thinking, rightly, that the letter would simply arrive in England with himself. Instead, he planned to write as soon as he landed and before he was headed to Colonel Hackett's location. His latest intelligence was that the Yorkshire 3rd Cavalry was quartered back in Margale.

The lines were withdrawn, the sails unfurled, and the *Legionnaire* pulled free of her moorings. As Reggie had feared, the choppy water and strong headwind made travel slow and uncomfortable. Few passengers were above decks, and one or two of those appeared greenish. His own stomach was unsettled, and he took a breath and swallowed, hoping to settle it.

The ship rose and crashed repeatedly, fighting her way forward against the angry sea. Reggie found that if he faced forward, he was much less disordered. Thus, he made his way along until he was beside the forecandle and as far forward as he could. The midday sun stood overhead, though he still felt most comfortable with the coat on.

The captain, a man named Huddleston, stood on the forecandle shouting orders as the ship tacked lumberingly forward. Reggie found himself staring around from time to time in search of a French ship on the attack. His core vibrated with the stab of fear the thought brought, but he fought it down and faced forward once again.

He was not invited to dine with the captain that evening, traveling as he was as simple Reggie Darrow and fitting the role in which his borrowed clothes placed him. Rather, he sat with the crew seated just off the galley and was granted a lipped plate that held just enough of the cook's fish stew.

Sitting with the other men, he listened to the banter and grumblings. When he had finished, he handed the boy his plate and climbed back up onto the deck.

The wind had died down, but the sea was still alive. He watched the lanterns being lit and searched the sky for the moon, spotting it hanging over the black horizon. It gave ample light to the sky and was augmented by the numerous stars coming out. They twinkled into life, and he thought Penelope's face emerged in a twinkling pattern.

He hung his head, thinking ruefully that he might as well simply go against his parents and marry the girl he loved. If she would have him...if she hadn't taken someone else.

Still, he did not know what his parents had heard about him. Had they been told he'd perished? Had they been told anything? Perhaps they thought he simply hadn't written in a while. Should he write or go directly home and check in with Colonel Hackett afterward? So many questions... Although, General Fitzhugh had impressed upon him the importance of reporting as quickly as possible.

To Margale, then. He would report first and then ask permission to go to his family. If denied, then he would write to them. He nodded to himself—it seemed like a good plan.

Next morning, the air lay still against the limp sails. The crew focused on mopping and cleaning, as the winds had calmed, and the ship was not moving. The other passengers gathered on deck to sit in the sun and read or nap.

Reggie found himself edgy and desirous of getting underway. He glanced often to the forecastle, where the captain's portly form could be seen scanning the horizon from time to time with his spyglass. At least, Reggie thought, any French ships would be just as stranded as they on the open sea.

By the next day, the winds had picked up, and a steady tailwind got them moving at a good clip toward England. Their ultimate goal was Southampton, where Reggie would catch the post and travel north to Margale with at least two changes.

General Fitzhugh had provided him with sufficient funds to reach his destination, but he counted out his money carefully as he planned his trip. The problem with growing up wealthy was that he had little idea of what things cost. He decided to err on the side of uncertainty and try to ensure he had enough to reach his goal.

The days passed calmly, and soon they were pulling into Southampton. Reggie had his bag over his shoulder, waiting on deck for the lines to be tossed and tied off and the gangplank to be lowered. He stepped off the ship and cast around for the post office, to find out when the coach would arrive.

The sun was still low in the sky, sending long shadows across the road as Reggie walked through the growing throng. After asking a constable, he made his way to a pub and inquired at the bar about the post. The transaction was quickly accomplished, and he set himself to waiting the nearly three hours

before it was expected. He ordered an early luncheon and ate in contented solitude as he watched the people around him.

Hours later, a rumble from the street outside hailed the arrival of the coach. Reggie waited as riders disembarked and trunks were untied and lowered to the ground. Then he stepped forward and slid into place on the broad seat, sitting as close to the window as possible.

There were only two others sitting inside the coach and he nodded to both of them as he stowed his bag beneath the seat. One, a termagant of an old woman, sat ramrod straight in a faded black gown. She barely inclined her head toward him. The other was a middle-aged man with long sideburns who sat with his arms crossed and his eyes closed. Reggie settled in and prepared for a long ride with little conversation.

At the last minute, a young mother with three children climbed into the coach. Reggie was forced to press up against the male occupant as two of the children sat beside him, while the mother and the youngest child sat beside the elderly woman. The atmosphere of the coach became a little more tense as the children began to be fractious.

“Joseph, don’t kick your sister. Bella, stop picking your nose. Be still, so you won’t bother the nice gentleman there.”

Reggie tried to smile, but he was wary of the little girl and her dirty finger. The boy lashed out suddenly, kicking his sister. The mother admonished him yet again as the little girl set to wailing.

“That’s enough,” said the elderly lady in black. “We will not have that racket all the way to London.”

The children went silent and stared with wide eyes at her. Then the boy, eyes still on the old lady, reached out with his foot, and gave a small shove to his sister, who once again wailed.

An umbrella suddenly appeared and rapped down hard against the boy’s shin. He howled in pain as the old lady pulled her umbrella back and settled it in front of her knees. “We will have none of that on this trip.”

Silently, Reggie cheered the old dame on. With her stern eye on the children, the trip was much calmer than it would likely have been.

At one point, the little girl fell asleep against him and he braced himself, then cringed as a line of drool escaped the corner of her mouth and puddled on his elbow.

Through the rest of the day, they traveled in relative harmony until they reached the environs of London. The children bounced about, trying to look out the windows. As they came to the main stop, Reggie got out, searching for the direction the next coach would come from. He glanced at a clock and settled himself on a seat nearby to keep watch. Traffic and bustle revolved around him for hours until the coach came in the early evening.

He paid his fare and climbed into the dark interior, making out a spare spot on the seat and lowering himself into it. He seemed to have interrupted a conversation which slowly warmed back up after he was seated.

“But, Edmund, you don’t treat me as you should. Look at ‘ow Mr. Menfries speaks to ‘is missus. All sweet an’ polite as could be. You barely says one kind word to me from mornin’ ‘til night.”

“I bet Mrs. Menfries doesn’ bovver ‘er mister ‘bout nuffin like you does.”

“I don’t bovver you, I tries to talk to you. ‘ear wot you might ‘ave to say.”

“All stuff you get out of those papers you reads. Why’s you read so much? Other women ‘as ovver stuff to do.”

“I gets all my stuff done, and then reads. Whyn’t you read more?”

“Don’t know as I can. Got enuff t’ do.”

Reggie leaned back and closed his eyes, trying to block the woman’s high-pitched whine from his thoughts. They traveled through the night, stopping late morning in a town so they could order a quick breakfast from an inn. Reggie’s body ached from the constant rattling along the road and his ears pounded from the constant sound. He went as far from the arguing couple as possible and sat, eating his toast and eggs. A crunch indicated he’d found an eggshell in the eggs but rather than be rude and spit it out, he made a face and swallowed it.

The passengers were called back, and he rose with a sigh to rejoin the others. They had lost a man, so Reggie was able to sit next to the window which he opened to allow fresh air into the coach. The arguing couple and an elderly man joined him and soon they were underway again.

They arrived in Margale around midday the following day. Reggie carried his bag of borrowed clothing to the encampment on the edge of town. Making his way along the barracks, he nodded at a few faces he recognized, but did not stop to talk until he reached the colonel’s home.

Before he could speak, the colonel glanced up from his desk and frowned. “Who is that?”

“Lieutenant Reginald Darrow.”

“That man was reported lost at sea.” Colonel Hackett peered sternly at Reggie.

“I know, sir. I can explain.”

“Siddown. Do so.”

Reggie availed himself of the chair and began. By the time he was done, the furry eyebrows had climbed high on the colonel’s forehead.

“What did your family have to say about all of this?”

“I don’t know, I came to you first.”

“Son, you need to go to your parents. A letter will simply not do.”

“I wanted to report first and ask permission.”

“Go tell your family that you’re alive, for God’s sake! The army will wait. We’re in a holding pattern until the powers that be decide where they want to send us.”

“Then, with your permission, I’ll continue on and visit my family in

Lytchley.”

“Hang on, I’ll get you a horse. We lost more men than horses at Salamanca.” He called to a soldier behind him. “Run to the stables and ask for one of the spare horses to be saddled up. Take Darrow with you.”

The soldier jumped up and Reggie followed him. Soon enough he was astride a leggy, brown gelding. He turned him toward the road and urged him to a slow canter along the somewhat bumpy road. He relished the feeling of being on horseback once again and in the open air. He would need to overnight in the tiny town of Elmond before completing the ride to Lytchley the following morning.

The inn at Elmond had room for him, though when he woke up the next morning there was another body in the bed with him. He dressed quietly and went downstairs to eat a hot breakfast before heading out.

As he neared Lytchley, excitement overrode his weariness from the several hour ride. The horse picked up his energy and quickened its pace as well. Soon enough, the third story of Hadring Hall, his home, peeked over the moor to his left.

He rode up the drive and pulled up to the stable where he dismounted, stretched, and handed the gelding off to a groom who stared at him. Winking, Reggie trotted up to the house and opened the door.

He interrupted his mother in the process of speaking to a small group of people clustered in the parlor. She caught sight of him and screamed, then promptly fainted. Lord Loughton stood instantly and went to her, meeting Reggie at her side and staring at him, mouth open and silent.

“Hello, Father. This is a bad show.”

“Reggie, my son—you’re alive.”

“Indeed, but we must make sure my dear Mama is as well,” he said as he chafed Lady Loughton’s hands.

Murmuring grew in the room and he looked around to see Lord Tollingham and his sister, Dr. Welles and his wife Addie, and Lord and Lady Strathom. Reverend Waddell was also present and staring at him with some confusion.

Lady Loughton opened her eyes and said to her husband, “I saw Reginald, truly saw him.”

“I’m here, Mama. Alive, as you can see.”

“Reginald!”

She clutched at him and he grinned down at her, then helped her to sit up. Lord Loughton helped her as well, and between them they raised her into a seat.

“But, I don’t understand!”

“Then let me explain.” And he did. He told them of the sea trip, escaping the French, being rescued by the Portuguese and making his way to the British army, then back to England where he’d reported to his regiment. “And now I am here—to show you by deed rather than letter that I live, still.”

Lord Loughton's eyes were damp, but he smiled at all those collected around them. "My son—alive!" he managed to say in a rough voice.

"Why did you not write?" Addie Welles asked.

"I thought I could arrive with the mail and deemed it unnecessary."

Addie rose, pulling her husband up after her. "We shall take our leave. No melancholy duty today!"

Reggie frowned at that.

Eliza, with a joyful expression, said, "We came to console your parents on your loss. Instead, we can celebrate your return!" She reached over and touched her husband on the shoulder. "Come, William, we can give the Welles a ride to their home on our way." She nodded to a servant who went off to call their carriage.

Soon, it was only the three of them left in the parlor, and Lady Loughton rose. "Reginald, your trunk is in your room still—no one had the heart to unpack it. You should find some decent clothes to change into for supper."

Reggie bit back a smile and rose. "Yes, Mama. I will see to it."

"I'll send my man to help you," Lord Loughton said.

"Thank you, Father."

He patted them both with real fondness and turned to make his way out. Once in his room, he quickly located his trunk and, after examining the wrinkled state of the clothing within, he closed it and went to the wardrobe instead. By then, his father's valet had arrived and quickly took stock of Reggie's state of dress. With a business-like air, he pulled out a shirt, vest, cravat, breeches, and a jacket while calling for warmed water for a quick wash after the long trip.

Reggie had to admit it was pleasant to be tended to and once again be in clothes that had actually been made for him. He let the valet brush and dress his hair, noting in the mirror that it had gotten long in the past weeks. By the time they were done, the bell rang, and he went trotting down the stairs to the dining room.

His mother stood looking regal in her best evening dress, and his father appeared every bit the lord of the manor.

"It only wants Henrietta and her George, and we'd have quite the family party," he said.

Not even the mention of George could dampen Lady Loughton's mood and her eyes crinkled happily as Reggie sat in his usual spot. Lord Loughton's smile matched hers, though some redness about the eyes betrayed tears lost in gratitude for his son's safe return.

Reggie's own eyes were alight from the knowledge that he was but a mile from Penelope's home. He decided to take advantage of his mother's good mood by asking, "Do you know if the Pratts are back?"

A distinctly icy expression settled upon his mother's face and it was left to Lord Loughton to answer, "Yes, I believe so. They arrived but a few days ago."

Reggie nodded to himself and tucked into his dinner. He had someplace to go...

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sitting at the pianoforte, Penelope played softly. The music echoed in the small room, sounding louder than it actually was. The last chord sounded just as the bell rang. Frowning, she rose and went swiftly to the door.

Sir William and Eliza stood there, and Eliza pushed in as soon as she saw Penelope and took her by the shoulders. "He's alive, Pen. Reggie's alive. We have just come from the Loughtons and he is returned home, safe!"

Penelope's mouth dropped open and she reached around for a seat. "What is this? How can this be?"

"He was rescued by fishermen and taken to Portugal. But it is he—Reggie is alive!"

Penelope grasped at the hands held out to her and buried her face against them. "Oh, heavens above, thank you!" was all she could say.

Sir William's hand fell upon Eliza's shoulder and she looked up at him. She pulled Penelope to her and hugged her before pulling away and saying, "I know it is getting late, but I couldn't let you go another night thinking our friend was truly lost."

"Thank you, oh, thank you!" Penelope cried, pulling Eliza close one more time.

When they were gone, she sat once more at the piano and this time a bright, happy tune rang through the house. So loud it was, she did not hear the footsteps on the stairs.

Not until her father called out, "Penelope! Isn't that quite enough practice for one day?"

"Oh, Papa! Wonderful news—Reggie Darrow is alive. He has come home!"

She saw her father nod and smile briefly before turning to climb back up the stairs. She pushed up from the seat and passed through the kitchen to the garden out back. Once there, she sat on the seat and hugged herself. Then she rose again and walked fretfully about the garden, unable to settle on any one activity. Instead, she wanted only to race to Hadring Hall and see with her own eyes that Reggie lived.

Glancing down, she saw a weed growing in the border that the gardener must have missed. She bent and pulled it out, then reached for another. For

the rest of the afternoon, she weeded the border, giving action to the feelings that roiled within her.

As the sun set, she brushed the dirt from her hands and went back inside. Mrs. Devry had dinner nearly ready, so she ran upstairs to dress. Once she had washed and pulled on her green silk gown, she went back downstairs to the dining room, surprised to find herself hungry for the first time in a while.

Her father was occupied reading reports through dinner, and so she was able to be silent, though she could barely contain her joy. It was tempered, however, with the knowledge that Reggie was still not hers, and might never be.

After dinner, she went to the piano and played quietly for a while as her father joined her and smoked his pipe contentedly. When she was finally worn out, she sighed and set the music sheets aside.

Closing the instrument, she rose to go to her bedroom, calling Edith as she went. Edith appeared at the top of the stairs and followed her into the bedroom.

“He is alive, Edith.”

“Well, isn’t that wonderful! No more pining about the house.”

Penelope stepped out of her petticoat and pulled on her nightdress, then spun on the spot before sitting to let Edith take down her hair. She brushed out the long, light brown locks. Then, before she could plait them up, Mrs. Devry called for help from down below.

“Oh, miss, I’ll be back...”

“Never mind, Edith. I can manage. You go help Mrs. Devry.”

Edith bustled off and she went to sit beside the window and gaze out, reveling in the feel of her hair loose and flowing down her back. As she did so, something moved in the shadows and she peered more closely.

It was Reggie.

With difficulty, she opened the window and leaned out. “It is you! Are you real?”

He laughed, looking up. Moonlight glittered in his eyes and deepened the intensity of his gaze. “It is. Did you truly think me lost?”

“We all did. The captain of the ship was so certain.”

“I will always find my way back to you.”

She smiled, brushing her hair back a little.

Just then, another window opened, and Mr. Pratt’s head emerged. “Young man, I appreciate the fact that you have arrived back from the dead, but it is rather late for calls such as this.”

“Yes, sir. Of course. Miss Pratt, will you do me the honor of receiving me tomorrow?”

She giggled. “Oh, yes. Quite.”

He saluted, then turned away and she shut the window, hugging her knees in glee. It was some time before she was able to sleep that night.

The doorbell rang late in the morning and Penelope answered it, being

closest. She paid a shilling for the letters placed in her hand and went through them. She recognized the handwriting on one and quickly opened it.

Dear Miss Pratt,

I find myself in Stanton, visiting a friend, and since it is so close to Lytchley, I was hoping to call upon you today. I will avail myself of your company only a short time as I must leave for London on the morrow and have further business here.

Yours,

Captain Desmond Coulter

Penelope read the short letter over again and blushed. To think that Captain Coulter was actually in Stanton and planning to visit.

She called out as she walked toward the kitchen, "Mrs. Devry, we need to straighten the house and prepare a decent tea. I may be having company today."

Mrs. Devry did not look up from kneading some dough. "I dusted yesterday, and have buns planned for tea today. I'll make some clotted cream to go with them."

Penelope nodded. "That sounds lovely."

She dragged her feet somewhat as she went upstairs to change into something more appropriate for receiving. She trotted up the stairs, a little concerned that she had potentially two visitors in one day. The thought of seeing Reggie again caused her heart to flip inside her chest and she took a deep breath to settle her nerves.

"Edith!" She raced up the stairs. Once there, she chose an afternoon dress of green, pin-striped muslin with a green sash. As an afterthought, she opened her grandmother's parure and selected the simpler earrings and then fastened her plain gold cross around her throat. Edith had already dressed her hair, so as she looked in the mirror, she was able to nod with approval.

The doorbell rang again just as she was going down the stairs and her eyes lit up as Edith went to the door. It opened, and Captain Coulter stood there.

Her smile became somewhat fixed, but she moved toward him nevertheless and greeted him. "Captain Coulter, how lovely to see you—and so far from London or Portsmouth!"

"An old lieutenant of mine lives in Stanton, and I had reason to visit him while the ship is being repaired."

"Repaired? What happened?"

"A little storm on the north end of Ireland. Cracked a mast, and it must be repaired before we sail again, or it will blow over in a good stiff wind."

"Oh, my goodness! And you are all right?"

"Yes, yes. It is no more than what might happen to anybody in a gale such as that was. We had to fight to keep from being dashed ashore, but here I am."

"Do sit down. I'll get some tea."

She rose and called softly into the kitchen for Mrs. Devry, who nodded and promised to bring it in shortly. Returning to the captain, she composed herself as she thought of Reggie showing up and joining them. She swallowed and sat down opposite the captain.

“I was surprised to find you had left London,” he said.

“Yes, we had some bad news and wanted to be home.”

“Not too bad, I hope.”

“Oh, the worst, only it turns out it was wrong. Our friend was not lost at sea as we had thought.”

“Lost at sea? This, I must hear.”

She quickly explained, and he shook his head. “Your friend is uncommonly lucky. I am not surprised he was deemed dead. It is truly remarkable that he survived.”

“Yes. We are all so relieved and grateful.”

A somewhat awkward silence fell, in which Penelope tried her best to avoid the captain’s earnest gaze. The bell rang again, and Penelope jumped up and went to it. She opened it to find Reggie standing there, his hair neatly cut and dressed for afternoon tea.

“Reggie!”

“Penelope!”

She stepped back and he followed her in, then stopped in his tracks at the sight of Captain Coulter who had risen from his seat.

“Lieutenant Darrow! Miss Pratt was just telling me of your remarkable escape!”

Reggie’s face had frozen, but his good manners came to the fore and he bowed slightly and forced a smile. “Indeed, it was most fortuitous.”

“It would seem fate has more in store for you,” Penelope said quietly.

Reggie turned to her and was instantly lost in her gaze. “Indeed.”

Penelope recalled herself and gestured to the sofa. “Do have a seat and join us. I’ll just get another cup.”

“I’ll help.” Reggie followed her into the back and whispered harshly, “What is he doing here?”

“He is just making a call. He was in the area.”

“He is courting you...”

Penelope spun on her heel, angry suddenly at his tone. “And what if he is? You didn’t want me!”

“That...I was in...my situation...”

“Yes?”

Unable to find the words, he stared at her and she gave a little nod. “Exactly. What am I to do, Reggie? Wait forever for someone who will never come?”

“I didn’t expect you to accept the attentions of the first man who came along.”

“He is hardly the first...”

“Oh, you’ve had loads of suitors?”

“Nonsense!”

He was flushed by this point, and with a final glare, turned and went out the back door. Tears of anger and grief stung her eyes, and she paused a moment before returning to Captain Coulter.

She set the tray down carefully, finding it difficult to see when her eyes were stung with tears. She glanced up to find Captain Coulter’s gaze upon her. His dark eyes were expressive in their concern as she quietly poured out the tea.

He took his cup and stirred it for a moment before saying, “Miss Pratt, I hope my presence has not caused any problems.”

“No. It is nothing to do with you. Lieutenant Darrow simply stopped by to say goodbye on his way back to his regiment.”

“Well, I am relieved to hear it. I had thought...but then, I suppose living in the same village must foster a certain degree of familiarity.”

“Yes, indeed.” She changed the subject. “And so, how long will it take to repair the ship?”

He went into a few particulars before saying, “I always meant to remark what an excellent sailor you seem to be.”

Surprise animated her face. “Really? I had not considered...”

“But yes, you were hardly disordered, kept your balance, seemed for all the world as though you were born to it.”

She smiled, then swallowed against the tears still pressing at the back of her eyes from the encounter with Reggie. “Thank you. I did not mind my time on the sea and would like to try it sometime when I am not overburdened with care.”

Captain Coulter stayed for some time, before regretfully taking his leave. Penelope watched him go. His intention was to catch the post back to Stanton.

She went back inside and slumped in a chair near the piano, then kicked out in a burst of frustration as she thought about the men in her life. That the captain was courting her was painfully obvious, and she had done nothing to discourage him.

She sat and considered it—the possibility of what he could bring. Life on the sea would be interesting, she supposed, but she did not feel the calling she had heard sailors often describe.

She heard only one calling, but that was patently not going to happen. Reggie had no interest in marrying her, and every interest in seeing she did not marry anyone else.

A deep, unshakable sorrow settled over her. From the back of the house, her father’s shaky baritone sounded and she knew he would be happy to see her settled with a well-off captain. She thought about all that life would demand of her and quailed at the thought of the intimacies demanded by marriage. Unconsciously, she shook her head against it.

She heard her father’s step on the stairs and to avoid conversation with

him, went quickly to the piano and began to play. The music lying open was a lively minuet which her father smiled upon as he walked past. She continued until she heard the door shut and the carriage come past the window.

Father must be going into Stanton, she mused.

She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and stepped outside. The late summer was aglow with lingering blooms and a warm sun, only the chill in the breeze hinted at the coming fall.

She stepped across the road and walked beside it until she reached the shops along the main street of Lytchley. Stepping slowly, she came up to Dimmits, noting an unfamiliar horse tethered just outside the shop. Pushing the door gently so as not to jangle the bell, she glanced over the interior, then went to the counter where bolts of cloth were stacked. She needed more handkerchiefs, and the younger Mr. Dimmits came toward her with a smile.

“Yes, Miss Pratt, what can I help you with?”

“I need a yard of cambric.”

“Ah, handkerchiefs?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

Watching listlessly as the fabric was cut, she answered his questions mechanically. No, she did not need any scissors; yes, a book of needles might come in handy.

Finally, he had everything ready, and she said, “Can you put it all on my father’s account?”

“Aye, miss. Will do. You have a lovely day.”

She stepped out of the store, only to bump fully into Reggie!

She drew back, saying, “Oh, I am so sorry!”

He stared at her, then shook his head and said, “Not at all.”

A very stiff silence ensued as she looked about and finally fixed her stare on the horse.

“That isn’t Charger...”

“Charger is dead. He was killed out from under me at Salamanca.” His voice was hard, and she had never heard him sound like that.

“Oh, how horrible.”

“Yes, it was. War is horrible, Pen. Or, should I say, Miss Pratt.”

“Reggie, please.”

“Mr. Darrow to you, Miss Pratt.”

“Why are you being like this?”

He fixed his eyes upon her. “Are you going to marry him?”

She drew back, unable to speak, then said quietly, “I don’t know.”

His face hardened and he swung up abruptly onto the horse’s back. “Wrong answer,” he said gruffly before twitching the horse about and cantering off.

She clutched her little package to her. Swallowing against the tears that scratched her throat, she walked home slowly.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Reggie spurred the horse onward toward home. Violent emotions raged through him. In his mind, he saw her standing beside Captain Coulter on the forecastle of the *Tempest*, and he could barely contain himself. He urged the horse faster, reining him up the drive and toward the stable where he pulled up harshly and slid down from its quivering back.

He felt a stab of contrition at the state of the horse and saw the expression on the groom's face. As he was leaving, the head groomsman came after him.

"Mr. Darrow?"

"Mowray?"

"Sir, you know better than to bring a horse back like that."

Reggie bit back a remark, then hung his head. He regretted letting his emotions get the better of him. "Is the horse all right?"

"Got the boy walking him right now. When will you want 'im next?"

"I need to leave early in the morning to head back to Margale."

Mowray considered. "If you don't drive him too hard, he should be fit to go."

"I won't. I really am incredibly sorry."

Mowray waved him on, and he walked up the slight rise to the house. He entered through the back entrance and wandered by the kitchen, where normally he would have grabbed something. That day he went past, thinking only that he had ridden a horse too hard and that he would never do so again, no matter what his state of mind.

What had started as a lighthearted jaunt to see Penelope had turned into a bout of stalking. After he had left her, he had lingered in the town to see how long the captain stayed. His anger had grown as each minute went by and the captain still had not come along. Finally, he had seen him stride purposefully toward the coach stop and board it after it came to a stop on the way from Winder to Stanton.

It had not been long before Penelope had appeared, and he had ducked into the Bucket and Bull to avoid her, only to bump into her upon attempting to retrieve the horse. And then to have driven the horse too hard—badly done!

He made his way up to his room and changed clothes. His father's valet

had cleaned the clothes from his trunk and managed to shine up his older boots. His mother had ordered more regimentals for him, and luckily the tailor still had his old measurements. He looked at the tangle of clothing being folded and replaced in his trunk and was thankful for his father's servants that prepared it for him. He had no idea how one would clean and pack clothing.

He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. A feeling of dread settled over him as he thought about future letters from his family... One would eventually carry news of Penelope's engagement.

Walls came down around him, trapping him in this life with no choices before him. On one hand was his duty to the country, and on the other was his need for Penelope. If he resisted returning to his regiment, he would be court-martialed for certain. There was nothing else he could do—he had to report to his colonel and endure the news when it came.

The night ahead of him stretched long and miserable. The night lumbered by with little sleep, and he rose early and slung his bag over his shoulder before heading out to mount up and head back to the camp. No one was up when he left, so there was no fanfare or commotion, simply the cold predawn air, a groom, and his horse.

His heart tugged him back with every step away from Lytchley. Looking backward, his horse came to a standstill, recalling his attention. His parents had promised to send his trunk on, freeing him of the responsibility of it. He resettled his pack and gave a slight kick to the horse.

The sky was patchy with clouds but did not threaten rain. The ground was mostly dry, just damp in a few patches with occasional standing puddles of water.

After a long day's ride, Reggie was back in Margale and checked into his barracks. The horse he had borrowed to get home had been trailed behind his own horse, meant to replace Charger. He brought both horses to the company stables and saw them safely established there. Then he walked into the mess as dinner was underway and sat down with his fellow soldiers.

"Darrow! All cured?"

"Much better, Stallworth."

"What happened?" asked a newer young man who Reggie did not know.

"Took a lance to the shoulder and side, and a cannonball to the face."

"Cannonball to the face!"

"Well, it hit the ground in front of me. Was blinded for a while."

"How's the sight now?"

"Much improved."

"Still a fair shot?"

"Haven't taken a gun out recently, but let's hope so."

The conversation helped to take him out of himself for a moment and gave him a break from the constant thoughts of Penelope in his head. He caught himself smiling at a story one of the men was telling and his spirits lifted a little.

He tossed and turned in his bunk that night, his mind alive though his body was tired and sore from the long ride. He longed for a home of his own with Penelope by his side. Then his mind would go to seeing her beside Captain Coulter at the fore of his ship and his soul would twist within him.

Morning came, as sullen as his mood. Breakfast consisted of gruel and undercooked bacon, neither of which lifted his spirits. He made his way to the training grounds and collected his musket for target practice. He loaded it and stood in line, waiting for his turn.

He brought the musket up and settled the butt against his shoulder, aimed, and shot.

And missed.

Frowning, he loaded the musket again and shot once more, only to miss a second time. The sergeant came forward and traded muskets with him. He loaded again and shot; the bullet once more went wide of the target.

The sergeant waved him on, and he returned to his barracks, confused. He had been an exemplary shot, known throughout his regiment for his quick aim. He went to sword practice next, only to find that he consistently missed the point on the target that he was aiming for. The day was still young, and yet he was being sent to the doctor.

The medical office was in the center of the camp, and the doctor himself was a barrel of a man with a fringe-like beard around his florid face. His brow creased as Reggie explained his history and performed a few tests.

Frowning some more, he said, "Your eyes did not heal completely and are not working together. Your left eye still sees incompletely, and the problem will be aiming."

"What can I do?"

"You will have to work on adjusting your aim for your sight. If you shoot wide to the left, then sight more to the right before you shoot."

Reggie nodded and walked away, thinking. If he couldn't get his aim down properly, then he wondered what his role in the cavalry would be.

He made his way back to the gun range and practiced for some time, eventually getting shots to hit the target but without any accuracy. As the light began to fade, he put his musket up and went to the mess hall to eat.

"There's Darrow. Missed you on the green," Stallworth said.

"Had to see the doc about my eyes." Reggie dished up some of the pork stew and cut a slice of bread.

"They're all healed, right?" Stallworth's ever-present smile froze.

"My sight appears to be affected. Aim is off."

Silence met this pronouncement. Only the sounds of spoons scraping plates could be heard for a few minutes.

Then Stallworth said, "What are you going to do?"

"I suppose I shall have to have a talk with the colonel."

"Well, let it go for now. It may all be well. Your eyes may just need to adjust."

Reggie nodded, suddenly not hungry. He scraped the rest of his stew into the slop bucket, which would go to a local pig farmer, and went outside to walk about in the fresh air for a bit and think.

Twilight had settled over the land, and shadows had merged to form a blanket over almost everything. He leaned against a fence post and considered.

His sight had been permanently affected, this he knew. Though vastly improved over the days when his eyes were so sensitive they needed to be blindfolded, he knew there was some residual damage. Despite this, he had assumed that he would be able to take up his old duties without interruption. That did not appear to be the case.

He wished he could write to Penelope. Somehow, he knew that just the action would soothe him and make the insurmountable problem go away.

He raised his head as he wondered, why should he not? They were old friends, after all. Surely there would be nothing to misconstrue if he wrote her a simple letter?

He went back to the barracks and sat at the communal writing desk to pen his letter. He lingered over the words for some time before addressing it and sealing it. Then he needed to walk it over to the mail bag and place it within, ready to be picked up when morning post was delivered.

It was two days later when a letter came for him. He frowned at the unfamiliar writing and turned it over in his hands before breaking the seal and unfolding it. It read:

Dear Lt. Darrow,

You do not know me, but I know of you. A common friend, Thomas Ventnor, spoke of you in his letters. I have since received the news of his death. I am planning to be in Margale on Tuesday, the fourteenth, and would like to see you if you could be prevailed upon to meet with me. I will be staying at the Dog and Whistle in Margale. You may call upon me there if you will.

Thank you,

Deborah Cohen

Reggie folded the letter up, thinking back to a conversation he'd had with Thomas before he'd died. He could not imagine why Deborah wanted to meet with him, but he admitted to some curiosity where she was concerned. He was also aware of her position, having lost this man who he had also valued.

Tuesday, and it was presently Saturday. He considered, and though feeling somewhat awkward at the thought, he could not find it in him to refuse. He slipped the letter into the pocket of his overcoat that was hanging on the hook beside his bunk.

Three mornings later, he walked from the encampment into the bustling town of Margale. The Dog and Whistle was one of the main pubs in town and had several rooms for rent above it.

He stepped inside and sat down at the bar, asking, "Is there a Deborah

Cohen staying here?"

"I dunno. Mary!" He waited until a portly woman came around the corner. "Is there a Deborah stayin' 'ere?"

"Yes," cried a voice from the stairs and Reggie spun to see who it was.

A girl stood on the stairs with a large bundle in her arms. It took him a moment to realize it was a baby.

She came over, and he was surprised to see that she was a petite young woman, and the baby just made her seem even smaller. She sat down at a table and adjusted the baby while Reggie rearranged his thoughts and hurriedly took the seat beside her.

"Thank you for meeting with me. You are Reginald Darrow, are you not?"

He nodded. "Indeed, yes. And you are Deborah Cohen."

"Yes." She saw his eyes go to the child and said, "It's a boy. I named him Samuel."

"Is he Thomas's son?" Reggie asked in a low voice.

She looked at him with sorrow in her dark eyes. "Who else's would he be?"

"I am so sorry for your loss."

She nodded. "I had to find out from the newspaper. His father wouldn't tell me."

"I didn't find out until I awoke in the hospital in Aveiro. It hit me hard. He was a good friend."

"I was hoping you could tell me something of him."

"I know he thought of you often. Did he know about Samuel?"

She shook her head. "I did not tell him. He had already bought his commission by the time I knew, and we had so little time together anyway. I didn't know what to do, but I didn't want him coming home to marry me just because of the baby. If he had wanted me enough, he would have claimed me."

"Now, don't think like that. He loved you, I know that to be true. He felt divided from you by your father, and it weighed upon him."

She seemed to think on this and said after a moment, "Thank you, that helps me. I had thought perhaps he had left me with little thought."

Reggie shook his head. "No, he thought of you often. I could always tell. He would get a faraway look in his eyes and become inattentive. And you are right, he would have run home to you if he had known about your child."

She hugged the sleeping baby closer to her and a tear appeared in the corner of her eye.

He glanced at the time and said, "I'll be expected back soon."

She rose, adjusted the baby, and extended her hand. He shook it with a bittersweet expression and turned away from the sad little woman.

He walked slowly back to the barracks, his mind revolving around what he had learned. He wondered how Thomas could not have known, and what

he would have done had he found out. Had he thought about his actions? Had he considered the possible ramifications? Or had he been too lost in his feelings to think clearly?

And what now? A girl would raise a child alone, a child that would be marked his whole life for having no father. Perhaps, though, she would find another man who would take her and the child and start a new life. He hoped so. Perhaps one day someone would come along to wipe the sorrow from her eyes.

When he returned, he collected his horse and saddled her. She had originally been trained as a hunter but had proven to be a better all-round horse similar to Charger. He'd relegated her to the stable to be used where needed, but with Charger's loss, Bette was called to action.

He rode out to the training grounds with his sword at his side. Rushing toward the targets, he slashed repeatedly, missing much of the time. It wasn't until the sword slipped past the dummy and nearly sliced into Bette's shoulder that he stopped and slipped the sword back into his sash and pulled his horse around to head back to the stables.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Penelope stared at the letter she held in her hands. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest, causing her ears to pound and her head to throb.

My dear Miss Pratt,

Forgive the brevity of this letter, however what I have to say can be quickly told. I have come to feel an ardent admiration and love for you, and it is with a humble heart that I request the honor of your hand in marriage.

In doing so, I know that I must lay before you all that you can expect from life with me. I come from a good family, have a ship of my own, and make a good living off the transport of wares. I am willing to buy you a house in either Portsmouth or Southampton. Unless, of course, you choose to live on board of my ship with me. In either situation, your happiness is what matters.

Let me know your thoughts regarding my proposal. I await your answer with much trepidation and care.

Yours, if you will have me,

Desmond Coulter

Suddenly, everything seemed very real. She had a decision to make and make soon. The answering letter could not long be delayed.

Coulter's words shook in her hands, and she set the paper down on her desk to stare at it.

"What am I to do?"

She was aware of speaking only when she heard the words aloud. With a decisive movement, she folded the letter up and tucked it into her reticule. Then she collected her shawl and headed out the door.

Her breath came fast as she walked the last distance to Tredwell Abbey. Ringing the doorbell, she wrung her hands a little and then clutched the strings of her reticule. The door opened and she entered, handing her shawl to the butler, and waiting for Eliza to appear.

She came down the stairs in a peach, muslin gown made with ample room for her expanding belly. She hugged Penelope and observed her with a piercing gaze before leading her to sit in the parlor near the fire.

Sighing a little, Penelope opened her reticule and removed the letter, handing it over after a momentary hesitation. "I need you to advise me, dear Eliza."

Eliza took the letter and read it through. Her eyes fixed Penelope and she said, "My dear, it is a handsome proposal. What do you need advice upon?"

A tear appeared at the corner of Penelope's eye as she shrugged lightly, taking the letter back. "I don't know. I guess to determine where my heart is..."

Eliza placed a hand on her arm. "I think you know where your heart is, otherwise, you would not be asking this."

"And yet, he does not want me, and Captain Coulter does. Father says I must marry...and I don't know what to do."

"I will tell you that a good marriage is hard work, and it is difficult enough at times with someone you love, much less someone you don't."

"I know, and yet..." She rose. "You're right, I need to think on this and decide. It must be my decision."

Eliza stood and hugged her once more. Penelope swallowed against her tears and patted the round belly, making her friend smile.

"He grows!"

"Or she!"

"Yes, or she. How much longer?"

"Another two months or so. It is getting to be so heavy. I am repeatedly astonished at the indignities suffered by women!"

"I am only just becoming aware. But I envy you, Eliza. So happily settled."

Eliza only lifted a hand as Penelope left.

She walked slowly down the drive to the road, hardly watching where she was going, simply letting her feet carry her on. Stepping slowly across, she climbed onto the open moor and stood at the top of the rise, looking out over the wildness. She clutched her shawl against the wind driving over the hillocks and watched a distant hawk circling.

Making her way along the narrow trail that led to the ancient abbey, she let her mind run about, imagining life aboard a ship and the other life she had once hoped to have. How to choose? But then, she thought, there was no choice between them. One life was already denied to her. The only choice was whether or not to accept the life offered to her.

The decaying arch of the old abbey rose up from the ground as she came over a hill. Stones lay scattered where they had fallen from walls that had long since come down. She sat on one low pile of stones and faced the crisp wind. Her bonnet brim fluttered against it and she reached up to smooth a tendril of hair and tuck it back into the cap.

Idly, she kicked her heels. How long, she wondered, could she delay answering? And what, after all, was the point of waiting?

With a sigh, she rose and made her way back to the house. Mrs. Devry clucked when she saw her and set her down at the table, before bringing a late tea in for her. Penelope tried smiling, but failed somehow and focused on the warm scone and the mildly sweet tea. It revived her a little. When she was

done, she went to the parlor and sat at the pianoforte.

She played long and hard, letting the instrument ring out through the house. The clock chimed the dinner hour and she stopped, rising quickly to go and dress. She selected her green gown with the silk organza overlay and stepped downstairs in time for the first course to be brought in.

Her father seated himself and arranged his napkin before looking up at her. "I am going to have to return to London. Do you wish to join me, or would you prefer to stay here?"

In her heart, she wanted to stay in Lytchley to be that much closer to Reggie. But then, she thought, perhaps that would simply perpetuate her anguish. Best to sever those ties, however painful that might be.

"I'll go with you, Papa."

"Excellent!" He seemed pleased. "Can you be ready to leave in the morning?"

"Yes, of course. I'll have Edith help me." She hastened through her meal as much as possible to go upstairs and organize her clothing for packing.

Morning came and promised to be a fair, though cool, day. Penelope stepped down wearing her palest pink muslin with a cocoa-colored spencer. She brought her bonnet, though she let it lie on the seat next to her so that she could relax more within the carriage. Her father frowned a little at it but said nothing.

The trip took the usual two days, during which she forced herself to think about the proposal that lay in her reticule. By the time they arrived in Chelsea, she knew she would have to answer the letter.

Still, she delayed, seeing to her clothing being unpacked and hung in the wardrobe to air. She was about to unpin her hair when a crash resounded from below.

She raced down, calling, "Papa? Are you all right?"

A murmur of voices rose as she turned the corner into the parlor. Her father was lying on the ground with the remains of a shattered glass scattered about.

Kneeling beside him, she lowered her ear to his chest and cried out, "Quickly—get a doctor!"

The door slammed shut behind the butler, who ran off down the street to a nearby doctor's home. Penelope fanned her father's face and chafed his hands, calling him over and over. Slowly, his eyes fluttered open, and he struggled to sit up, only to clutch his chest and lean back onto the ground.

The minutes stretched long into the night before the doctor knelt beside Aloysius. He directed the servants present to help him move the spare form of her father onto the sofa where the doctor performed his examination. After a long silence, during which he took pulses and listened repeatedly to the patient's heart, he dug a vial of pills from his bag and gave one to Aloysius. He swallowed it with a sip of water.

"It is an attack. Your heart has been affected and you are lucky to not

have died. I will have some pills sent round, and you must take them whenever you feel the pains begin again. Rest is necessary. And you will need to curb your activity.”

“For how long?” Aloysius said weakly.

“Forever,” the doctor said.

He stood, packing up, and leaving Aloysius to stare in horror after him. Then, he called the servants over to help him up the stairs, painfully slowly, until he reached his room. Penelope settled him into his bed, and he clutched at her hand.

“My dear, I know you have had an offer of marriage.” He shook off her denial and continued, “Take this as a warning—I will not live forever, perhaps not much longer. You need someone to protect you from the harshness of this life. For my sake.”

She swallowed. “Will it ease your mind to know I am married?”

“It would.”

“Then I shall think on it.”

He nodded, patting her hand. “Now, go. I am quite well enough. The medication has eased the pain considerably and all I want is to sleep.”

She bit her lip as she left him, fear for his life weighing heavily upon her. She let Edith help her undress, listening with half an ear to her frightened clucking.

“What will become of us if master dies?”

“Well, I shall inherit, shan’t I?”

“My dear, I do not think so. Who is your father’s next male relative?”

“I suppose that would be my cousin Paul Pratt.”

“Then you may be at his disposal.”

Sudden fear gripped Penelope as she drew her dressing gown tightly around her. With a weak flap of her hand, she excused Edith and sat on the edge of her bed. She barely knew her cousin—he had visited only a few times, though her father met him frequently when in London.

What would he do with her? Would her father have provided for her in his will? Where, she wondered, would she live?

She rose suddenly and went to the writing desk and quickly wrote out a letter, addressing it to Captain Coulter of the *Tempest*.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Reggie groaned as he lay back on his bunk. The day had been long, filled with training, and then an afternoon tea where he was expected to flirt with the landowner's daughters. He had failed miserably and been rather poor sport, but he could only go through the motions.

"Darrow?" came Stallworth's voice.

"Mmmhmm?"

"Letter for you." He flipped a letter over to Reggie and it fluttered down onto his chest.

Reggie picked it up and frowned at the familiar handwriting. Why would Henrietta be writing him again so soon? Sudden concern caused him to open it quickly and read the contents. It was short, and his gaze was arrested by the words:

"Penelope has had an offer of marriage from the good captain."

He lay the letter down and stood. It was late, the lamps had been lit and most of the barracks were settling down, but he strode from the room and trotted across the way until he came to the colonel's home. He knocked on the door and waited, his feet restless as he stood.

Finally, it was opened by a servant who allowed him into a small sitting room. There, he waited until Colonel Hackett arrived in a smoking jacket and he stood.

"Well, what is it?"

"Sir, I have to leave."

"I see. Sit down, Darrow."

Confused, Reggie sat and waited as the colonel cleared his throat. "Darrow, I have been meaning to speak with you. You are an excellent soldier and you have served the regiment well. But the damage to your sight cannot be overlooked. Your aim has suffered, and what is a soldier without his aim?"

It was as if the colonel had struck him. He recoiled and said, "Sir, but what is there for me to do?"

"Sell your commission and go home to your parents. You are the eldest son, yes? There is plenty you need to learn at your father's side."

"But..." His voice died away as the sense of the statement struck him. The timing also was not lost on him. He needed to go, and there was an

invitation to do so. He rose and extended his hand. "I thank you for the advice. If you hear of a man seeking a commission, send them my way. For now, I need to return to London."

He raced off toward the stables, calling for a groom to saddle his mare while he ran off to the barracks to pack for the journey. It was chancy to ride at night, but he had little choice. By the time he was back at the stable, his horse stood waiting for him and he vaulted aloft. Reining her around, he headed for the road.

The moon shone brightly, though only a half-moon. The night was clear and filled with starlight. He rode straight on through, stopping only in a village for a quick meal and a rest for Bette. Then it was on again through the sunrise and into the morning.

By the time the sun had fully risen, he could see the environs of London emerging along the sides of the road. By the afternoon, he found himself on the edge of the city itself, and traffic had thickened.

Bette was tired, but he urged her on across town toward Chelsea, and the Pratts' residence. Finally, the brick exterior appeared as he turned a corner and he slid down from his horse, tying her to the railing as he walked stiffly up the path.

The door opened before he reached it, and Penelope herself appeared dressed in an afternoon dress. She started upon seeing him standing there, her eyes wide and mouth open slightly. With a rush, he bent and kissed her.

Her lips molded to his as he pressed his mouth to hers. Her arms snaked about his neck, pulling him down harder against her and his arms all but crushed her to him. He lifted his head for a moment, then claimed her lips once again.

When next he pulled away, it was to whisper hoarsely, "I'll be damned if I let you marry anyone else. You're mine, do you hear?"

With a slight smile, she said, "Don't I have a say in it?"

"It depends. What is your say?"

"Yes. Oh, yes!"

He pulled her close and rested his head upon hers. "Can you forgive my hesitation? Dearest girl, I never doubted my love for you, only my family's resolve."

"I understand...or, I will. I am willing to understand, if that makes sense."

He nodded. "It does."

"And your family?"

He shook his head slowly, his gaze locked onto hers. "I don't care. It is my hope they will rejoice with me. But either way, we will be together and that is all I want."

"Where shall we live?"

One side of his mouth crooked up. "I haven't thought that far ahead. But definitely not at Hadring Hall!"

She laughed. "That is a relief, dear Reggie."

"Yes, my lovely Penelope." He frowned suddenly and said, "Were you going to accept him?"

She sighed. "I did. Father had a heart attack, and I wrote to Captain Coulter accepting his proposal. But then, in the morning, I had slept so badly over it, I tore it up and tossed it into the fire and wrote a very different letter."

"Well, I am magnanimous enough to sympathize with him."

"As am I. I feel dreadful."

"I am going to keep you too busy to feel dreadful for long. We are getting married quickly."

"How quickly?"

"How quickly can you be ready?"

She smiled. "Now?"

He smiled back. "Don't tempt me. Gretna Green is but a few days' ride."

She laughed then, suddenly realizing they were still in each other's arms on the front stoop of her home. Gently, she disentangled herself and made to pull him inside.

He hesitated, then said, "I should ride to Henrietta's and George's place. Put my things down and stable my horse."

She nodded. "I'll go tell Father. It will ease his conscience."

He kissed her again, long and lingering, before leaving her weakened at the knees, her eyes dilated with desire. She watched him go until he disappeared around the corner. Then, she turned and skipped into the house, running up the stairs to where her father sat in bed with ledgers all around him.

"Father, I'm getting married!"

He looked up, shock registering on his face as he said, "To whom?"

"Reggie Darrow."

"The Honorable? I thought his family..."

"We don't care. He doesn't care. He wants me, and that is all that matters."

Aloysius reached for her and she went into his fatherly embrace. "Oh, my dear. I am so happy for you."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The sun filtered weakly through the thin clouds to shimmer across the moor as the bridal party made its way down Lytchley's main street to the church. The groom and his family were already there, along with half the village, it seemed. Reverend Waddell waited at the altar with Reggie standing beside him as Penelope appeared at the entrance.

There were no bridesmaids, only the bride making her way down the aisle with eyes for her husband-to-be. The congregation twisted to watch her while she drifted by, all satin and silken lace. Her father beamed, while Lady Loughton sat with a pinched mouth beside a placidly content Lord Loughton.

Reggie simply grinned, full of love and pride for the woman about to join him in holy matrimony and spend the rest of her life at his side. She was suddenly there, and their hands were joined. He placed a ring on her finger and then they faced the congregation as man and wife. His heart soared.

The wedding breakfast took place at Hadring Hall. The congratulations flowed, and Penelope smiled and blushed and clung to her husband's arm. When the food had been eaten and the last toast given, Reggie led Penelope to the front, where a new carriage waited. He waited until she was settled in before climbing after to sit beside her. Then the door was shut, and they started off toward their new home.

Down the road they went to the village of Lytchley, past the shops and houses, to the little manor at the very edge of the town. What had once been the Pratts' manor home, was now Tempest Cottage. Mrs. Devry and Edith met them at the door. Aloysius welcomed them in before stepping out the front where his own carriage waited. It would take him to his London home where he would stay, barring the occasional visit.

Soon the servants went back about their business, and Reggie sat in the parlor, eyes fixed on Penelope as she played an old Irish love song at the pianoforte with a soft and expressive hand. A smile lurked about his mouth as he watched her, and he suddenly rose and crossed the distance to bend down and claim her lips.

The playing stopped and her hands wound around his neck. With a slight groan, he bent and lifted her in his arms to carry her up the stairs to their bedroom. She struggled with a knowing smile until he set her down inside the room that would be their own. Then, the door shut securely behind them.

The End

at Amazon, Goodreads, and BookBub!

About the Author



Grace Colline lives in Stockbridge, Georgia with two of her five children and way too many dogs. When she is not grading papers for her online Biology classes or cooking, she is dreaming of worlds very different to our own. For inspiration, she sits at her spinning wheel turning fiber into yarn until the story is ready to be told.

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